



Competition's a Witch

the sequel to *The Salem Witch Tryouts*

You've gotta have spirit . . .

KELLY MCCLYMER

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I was only mildly curious about the mortal boy standing in my living room. Until our nosy neighbor said, "I want to introduce you to my son, Angelo."

"Nice to meet you." Mom smiled warmly at him. "This is my daughter, Prudence."

Angelo looked at me and smiled. "Hello, Prudence. That's a neat name."

And the world stopped. I mean it. Despite the fact that no one in his right mind would think Prudence was a neat name, Angelo's attention had turned on me like a hot spotlight on a stand-up comedian. Tag, I'm it. And it feels good. . . .

Lots of words came to mind. Forget "cute," it was so not up to the task of describing him. Try hot. Scorching. Sizzling. I wanted to see if the rest of him lived up to the first impression.

And yes, I was playing with fire. So sue me.

Also by Kelly McClymer

The Salem Witch Tryouts

Getting to Third Date

Competition's a Witch

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Simon Pulse
New York London Toronto Sydney

To Jim. For everything.



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Chapter 1



I thought making the cheerleading squad at Agatha's Day School for Witches would put the yang back in the yin of my seriously out of whack life. Really, I did. I should have known better, but I didn't. The problem was that I was still stuck in remedial magic classes. Which meant I couldn't cheer in games against other witch schools—only in games against mortals. The rest of the time, I was warming the bench. Not the greatest way to gain kewl status at my new school.

And, boy, did I need to get my status back—even if it was with a witchy twist. Since my parents decided to move our family from Beverly Hills, California, to Salem, Massachusetts, a month ago, I've been feeling like I can't do anything right and wondering if I'm about to slide into scud hell, no passing

go, no collecting two hundred dollars, and *definitely* no Get Out of Scudsville Free card.

A month is half a lifetime in school years, so I was really counting on that place on the squad to duke me some kawl. Daminee, was I wrong. Just like I'd been wrong when I thought it would be a snap for me to translate being a star student and totally rad cheerleader in my old mortal school to my new "witches only" school. Sigh.

Here's a clue to just how well my "Prudence Stewart Plan to Conquer Witch School" was going. I was sitting in the headmistress's office for the third time in a month. At least I was the one who wanted the meeting this time. For once, I wasn't being called on the carpet for something I'd done wrong. It was no comfort at all that my mom was sitting next to me, or that the headmistress was glaring at her instead of me. My dad wasn't there, of course—he isn't a witch and mortals aren't welcome at Agatha's, even if they're married to witches, or parents to them, either. I guess this was a good thing, because I don't know if I could have dealt with a frosty headmistress and a dad freaked out by her uber-witchiness.

Our revered and freakishly ancient headmistress prefers white. Frost-white, to be exact. Her office could have been carved out of an iceberg. In fact, maybe it was, because there was a little breath visible when she leaned forward, speared me with her pale blue gaze, and raised her thin white eyebrows. "Mr. Phogg has indicated that you

wish to test out of remedial classes early. Is this correct?"

"Yes." With Agatha, I had learned that one-word answers, provided quickly and cleanly, were best.

She looked at my mother. "You agree with her, then? You think a girl who came a whisper away from being expelled a few days ago should be given an opportunity for which all the other students have to wait until spring?"

My mother nodded, and a little puff of warm breath expelled when she said, "In Prudence's case, I think the request is reasonable."

"I'm sure you do." Agatha took turns staring at both of us for a few moments.

I started to get nervous. Did she want me to plead my case? To apologize for getting her great-great-great-great-grandson Daniel in trouble, even though it was really *him* that got *me* in trouble? (Not that I was holding a grudge. Not against him, at least.) I wasn't going to walk away from this conversation, that was for sure. No one gets anything who isn't willing to ask for it, or so my old cheering coach used to tell us at the beginning of every season, when fundraising started and our parents groaned in protest.

Was trying to convince Agatha to give me a chance to test out of remedial magic classes early any worse than trying to get super-Pilatecized Beverly Hills moms to cough up twenty bucks for a bar of bad chocolate? Okay, so it was . . . a little. But still, what else could I do? I, who have never stammered

in my life, stammered, “I w-w-want to test early because—”

Agatha held up her hand. “I’m certain I understand, Miss Stewart.” Okay. So she didn’t want an explanation. Should I go for an apology? It was the only option left, short of giving up. And that just wasn’t in my nature.

But before I could open my mouth, Agatha turned to my mother. “I know you’ll agree that Prudence’s attachment to mortal ways severely limits her ability to acquire the witch skills she lacks.” Which was something I really couldn’t argue with. However, I could very much disagree when she added, “I suggest she change her after-school activity from cheerleading to . . . oh, I suppose Potions for a Better Tomorrow might be a good after-school group for her. That would allow her more time for her studies, and it might help her lift her GPA in the process.”

Potions for a Better Tomorrow? No way. I looked at my mother, willing her to recognize that my life would be over if I had to quit cheering. It was the only thing I was any good at here in witchworld, where she’d dropped me without a choice—or a magic parachute to break my fall from A-plus kewl student on the fast track to the Ivy League, to remedial magic class scud with a dash of Eau de Mortal dabbed on my pulse points.

You see, my parents decided, without any warning, to move us clear across the country just weeks before I was to begin my junior year at Beverly Hills High School. Where, I might add,

I was going to be head cheerleader of the varsity team (first junior ever to get that honor). I was also planning to run for student council president. And now, after spending sixteen years in the mortal realm—no magic allowed—my little brother, Tobias (aka the Dorklock), and I were required to go to a school for witches. With magic very much on the course schedule.

Imagine if you've never been allowed to touch the keys on a piano and then you're told you not only have to touch those keys, but you have to play the piano as well as kids who've been practicing their whole lives. And then imagine that your dorky little brother turns out to be Gifted and Talented at piano, even though it had been forbidden his whole life (sneaky little brat). Substitute magic for piano, and that's my life in a size-zero nutshell.

True, I had nearly been expelled last week for a teensy-weensy misstep in the school lunchroom. But that wasn't cheer related. That was boy related. Cheering I could handle, even if it was of the magical variety. Sure, it had taken every ounce of persuasive skill I had to get a spot on the team—but I made it. So no way was I dropping cheerleading for Potions for a Better Tomorrow.

Maybe making an immortal enemy of the headmistress and founder of my new school wasn't the best recipe for success. But it wasn't as if I meant to. After all, I had no way of knowing that Daniel, the cute bad boy who was too hot to resist, was her great-great-great-great-grandson.

Of course, that knowledge might not have changed anything. Daniel was easy to follow into trouble. But, the truth is, I only found out when Agatha busted us in a time bubble, kissing. In the school lunchroom. Just about ten seconds before Daniel blew me one last kiss and disappeared. Leaving me alone to face Agatha's wrath. She hadn't expelled me, but that was only because it was no secret I didn't have the skill to create a time bubble and Daniel did, ten times over.

So. Agatha hated me. With a white, cold passion that made her blue eyes frost over every time she looked at me.

Mom had tensed when Agatha brought up the word "mortal." "Prudence wishes to take the test early, Agatha. The other . . . unfortunate . . . incident is not relevant. Except perhaps to show that she regrets breaking the school rules, and wants to prove her willingness to fit in and become an outstanding, rule-abiding witch. She has been studying more than diligently, I assure you."

"Studying hard, is she? What, I wonder, given the reports I have from her teachers that she often does things the mortal way?" Agatha leaned in to examine me more closely. I tried not to flinch. "Has your Talent manifested yet, in all this studying?"

"No." Since arriving in Salem, I'd learned that I was supposed to have some big skill in one of the five Talent areas: Earth, Air, Water, Fire, or Magic. Magic was the most respected Talent, while Air and Water were bottom of the

heap. Since my mother was an Air Talent and my father was mortal, what I'd be was anyone's guess. If I even manifested a Talent at all. Which is a depressing thought, given that a witch who doesn't manifest a Talent isn't even a full-fledged witch.

Mom jumped to my defense. "She will manifest soon, Agatha, I can sense it. If you could bend the rules a little, I'm sure regular magic classes would help Pru manifest her Talent even sooner. What could be the harm?"

Agatha looked at Mom with the same deep doubts I felt. Great. Neither one of us believed Mom was anything more than a mother who wanted to believe the best about her hopelessly unTalented child.

Agatha sighed deeply, clearly pained to have to deal with dunderheads like my mother and me. "You ask what harm in bending rules? You? Who married a mortal and raised two children in the mortal realm, then realized the folly of your ways and came back to beg me to help you teach your daughter what she should have been learning all along?"

Mom shifted a little in the hard white visitor's chair. But she didn't sound as if Agatha's words had bothered her. "I thought you approved of students taking initiative."

"Initiative? Is that what you call it?" Agatha's blue eyes focused on me as if I were a particularly poor specimen of arrowroot. The kind that can make a potion do something it shouldn't, as I had discovered the hard way.

“Yes. That is what I call it. She’s been studying, and I’ve had her tutored—”

“By whom?”

“My cousin, Seamus.” Mom almost, but not quite, mumbled the name.

Agatha might be a thousand years old, but her ears were still sharp. “Seamus? Another one who likes to ignore the rules and take unconscionable—and unfortunate—shortcuts. You’ve practically convinced me you’ve given this girl no choice but to cause trouble for herself and this school, Patience. Surely you have not forgotten the old days, and my lecture on the virtue imbued in your name. I feel certain I gave it to you so often, it must be engraved upon your eardrums.”

“Patience is not just a name, it is a virtue. I believe you even had me stitch it on a sampler.” Mom popped something onto Agatha’s desk. A sampler, hand-stitched, stretched, and framed in glass to preserve it. “As you can see, I still have it.” Mom looked at it with a smile. “I did a very good job, even you must admit.”

You’d think Agatha would be pleased that my mother still had her long-ago lesson at hand. But no. A fine mist of fury began to rise from her white robes. “I suppose your pride in such mundane mortal skills should have warned me that you would find the mortal world so appealing. I presume your mortal husband is still in the household?”

"Of course he is." Mom popped her sampler away quickly, probably to prevent Agatha from destroying it in a fit of temper. "But I don't see that as a problem at all. He fully supports our children training to be the best witches they can be. He would have been here, if only—"

"If only he weren't mortal?" Agatha finished for her.

Mom nodded. "He wants Prudence to be the best witch she can be," she repeated.

Ummm. Right. That's why he turned green whenever we talked about magic in front of him. To be fair, he's never asked us to stop. Not since we moved to Salem. But I know one reason, besides Agatha's rules, that my dad wasn't here at this meeting was that Mom hadn't told him about it.

"I've never met a mortal who wasn't eventually driven mad if he found himself privy to the knowledge that we witches exist," Agatha said coldly.

"My husband is not mad."

"Clearly. The man has managed to live with you for twenty years." Agatha gave a delicate shudder, which somehow managed to convey how mad she thought that was.

Mom's voice got that edge that meant her protective instincts were engaged. "My husband is a good man. I do not hold it against him that he is not a witch."

"The trouble with mortals," said Agatha, "is that they do not, and *can* not, believe in magic. As you are learning now"—Agatha glanced at me—"living in the mortal world

can be harmful to your children and their education.”

Mom sighed. “I know. I know. But I assure you that my husband not only believes in magic”—that was kind of a little white lie. Dad knows magic exists, because he lives with Mom. But he doesn’t think it’s a good thing, exactly—“he also loves and wants the best for his children.”

Agatha sniffed. “Then why would he insist that you raise Prudence blind and deaf to magic in the mortal world in the first place?” Apparently, the question was rhetorical, because Agatha continued before Mom or I could respond. “Because *he* can’t see it, he thinks it isn’t important.”

I didn’t like that she had a point. The problems I was having with my magical education were directly related to the fact that I had been living in the mortal world and trying to fit in there. Even dumb old mortal-raised me could see that.

For a minute, I dared to hope that Agatha would agree to let me test out of remedial magic classes early, just out of pity that my mom had taken such a misstep in my witchly education.

Until my mom said, “I chose to live in the mortal world. And to raise my children there. Magic isn’t everything.”

Magic isn’t everything. If possible, the already Arctic temperature in Agatha’s office dropped to absolute zero. My mom had said it aloud. The words hung there in the frosty silence for a moment while none of us dared to breathe.

Agatha drew back as if Mom had said a very nasty four-

letter word. "I always wondered if you might have inherited a touch of madness from your grandmother."

"My grandmother was not mad," Mom replied. "She simply believed she could help ease suffering during the Black Death."

"Indeed." Agatha nodded, even though she clearly didn't agree. "Well, I suppose we should be grateful that her untimely demise showed us witches were vulnerable to that disgusting mortal malady and helped our healers find a way to stop the plague before it could decimate us the way it did mortals."

"Exactly. We are very proud of her." Mom's argument sounded weak to me. More avoidance of the central issue—namely, that she had raised us in the mortal world because she didn't think magic was everything.

Agatha smiled, playing with my mother like a cat plays with a mouse. "Still, it would have been easier—not to mention healthier—for her just to avoid the area altogether until the plague passed. I don't understand why some witches are so fascinated with mortals."

Mom kept up her weak defense. "My grandmother didn't believe that only witches deserved compassion. She was a healer, and that was what she did, no matter whether the invalid was a witch or mortal."

Okay. Maybe it wasn't a weak defense. It just wasn't going to work against an ancient witch who was certain that mortals had nothing of interest to contribute to her life—or life in general.

As Agatha demonstrated when she spoke again. "Exactly.

Madness. Not that I'd expect you—or your daughter—to understand how dangerous dabbling in mortal things can be. Not to mention how dangerous magic can be when a witch is ill-trained.”

She narrowed her eyes and I knew she was thinking of the time bubble again.

Mom must have realized it too, because she quickly gave up defending her dead ancestor and came to the defense of her living—so far—daughter. “Prudence did not have the skill level to create a time bubble.”

“Nor did she have the sense to avoid it.” Agatha waved her hand. “You raised her among mooncalf mortals for sixteen years! For all I know, she believes that witches fly on brooms and can be killed by falling houses or buckets of water.”

“Prudence is a level-headed girl.”

Agatha's raised eyebrow indicated a certain lack of reassurance. “But is she a competent witch? Can she be? I have grave doubts about whether or not she will ever be able to make up for the disgracefully poor education you provided her in the important formative years.”

Mom stood up. “The test will determine that.” She was angry. I only wished I knew whether she was angry because she thought Agatha was wrong—or because she was afraid she was right.

Agatha sat back, evidently pleased that she had made my mother lose her temper. “So it will.” She looked at me.

“Do you see why dealing with mortals can cause trouble?”

I knew I was supposed to say yes. But that felt like I was betraying both my mom *and* my dad. “As long as I don’t mix magic with mortal—”

“Enough.” Agatha leaned forward again. “You are not ready for the test.”

Frappiola. I was sinking fast. I remembered a trick that had worked for me in the past and dug frantically in my purse. “Wait! I’ll give up all my mortal ways. I promise. I want to be a witch. I want to be the best witch I can be.”

Agatha gave me a chilly smile. “Do you?”

My fingers clutched what I was looking for—a notepad and pen. I nodded, not daring to say anything that might ruin my chance to test out of the remedial class early.

“Then pay attention in Mr. Phogg’s class, and perhaps then you will understand how lucky you are to be away from life among mortals. And remember this, Miss Stewart: Talent without hard work makes the ancient ones sigh, but hard work without Talent makes them weep.”

I whipped out my pad and pen and wrote that down. “Got it. I’ll tape it to my mirror and read it every day when I brush my hair.” What teacher/headmistress/ancient weeyotch wouldn’t be impressed by that?

Agatha looked at my notepad as if it were a cockroach. Then she stared at Mom for a moment, and I think my mother actually squirmed, just a little.

I was squirming—inside, at least—a lot. Because witches don't write with pen and paper. Pen and paper equals mortal. Equals Pru is the biggest loser ever.

I popped them away as quickly as I could. But it was too late.

“Magic *isn't* everything?” Those cold blue eyes turned back to me. “If you want to test out of remedial magic—ever—first you must be sure that you do not let me see the taint of the mortal world. It has addled your mother's judgment, and from what I have seen today, it will continue to get in the way of your magical education.”

“It won't. I promise you.” I wouldn't let it.

“I will be watching, Miss Stewart. And the answer to whether you will ever be allowed to test out of remedial classes will depend on what I see.”

Great. Just great. “I'll work hard. You'll see.” I smiled, as if I thought having Agatha watching me—judging me—were the best thing ever.

“And never forget hard work without Talent will earn a witch nothing. Magic *matters*. It's *all* that matters.” With that, she waved her hand, sending a puff of cold, damp air against my face.

Mom and I were back in the kitchen before I could blink. Agatha's final words, however, had lodged in my heart like an icicle launched from one of the Dorklock's makeshift panty hose slingshots.

It didn't help when Mistress Harte, the ghost who rules the netherworld inhabitants of our house, appeared to pat me on the head and drop a scrap of paper in my lap.

It read, "Hey, 666 Girl. Magic *is* everything." It wasn't signed, but I didn't need a signature to know that I'd just gotten a note from Daniel. He was the one who'd nicknamed me after my unfortunate locker number, 666. The note flared up in smoke and disappeared. Just like Daniel had. It'd been a few days since the time bubble incident, but he was still on the lam.

"What was that?" Mom asked.

Right. I was going to tell her the boy who had nearly gotten me expelled was sending me notes? I don't think so. "My life. Can't you tell by the way it went up in smoke?"

"I'm sorry, honey." Mom had a "these things happen and we have to be brave" look on her face.

"Right. Me too. Sorry you thought it was okay to raise us without magic."

Because anything else would have been anticlimactic, I turned on my heel to stalk off. Then I caught myself. No more mortal moves. From now on, I was pure witch. And I popped off to cheerleading practice before Mom could say a word.



Chapter 2



O-K!

It's time to fly!

Don't need no broom!

This here witch!

Is gonna own the room!

I was a little late for practice because of the meeting with Agatha. I had hoped to sneak in and start stretching without any of the girls—not to mention Coach Gertie and Tara, the head cheerleader—noticing, so that I would have time to get my cheer face on after getting shot down big-time. I also wanted to avoid the penalty for being late for practice, which ranged from ten laps to two

hundred push-ups, depending on how cranky Tara was.

I'd forgotten that the school grapevine in witchworld was even better than the one in Beverly Hills. Everyone knew I'd been to see Agatha. And everyone knew why—because I'd told them. And they were waiting for me to spill the beans because, even though we all love cheering, any diversion from the grind of practice is always welcome. Especially when it was as juicy as whether or not the headmistress would bend the rules for the new girl.

I didn't want to tell anyone what Agatha had said. Not even about my adoption of a mortal-free lifestyle. Call me chicken, but I'd known a girl, back in Beverly Hills, who had announced that she was a vegan. Everyone who hadn't paid any attention at all to what she ate before that suddenly became the meat and dairy police. I didn't want anyone at school, never mind my teammates, noticing any slipups on my part. Habits are hard to break—ask any cheerleader whose coach took shortcuts.

But I couldn't skip practice. And even if I did, I'd still have to answer the questions tomorrow.

I spent a few moments wondering if I could weave a spell that would convince Coach and the other girls on the team that I was no longer in remedial magic. But the whole not-very-good-at-magic thing kind of worked against my confidence in casting a school-wide spell in a place that was wired to prevent kiddie magic from turning things haywire.

Back home, I wouldn't have hesitated to rally the troops for an all-out diss-fest on the unfair practices of school officials. Back home, however, I wouldn't have been worried that I was a poser who deserved what I got and shouldn't have asked for special consideration in the first place.

Of course Tara, as head cheerleader, was the one who asked the question they all wanted to know the answer to. "So, how'd it go, Pru? You out of Magic for Dummies yet?"

When I looked at all the faces turned toward me—including Coach Gertie herself—I knew I had to put on my good cheerleader attitude and make the most of the disaster. "She said she'd think about it. No rule bending for me right now." I tried to sound upset about it. Not that I wasn't upset. I was upset, all right. At the possibility I'd *never* be able to pass a test to get out of remedial magic, even if Agatha decided to let me take it.

"Too bad." Coach Gertie didn't look surprised. "But at least you won't be focused on passing the test now, and you'll be able to put all your energies into creating a great routine for the squad when we go to the regional competition."

Right. Regional competitions. That was the whole reason I'd made the team in the first place. I had been on a competition-winning squad—mortal, of course. Which wasn't a big minus, since all competitions were mortal. And now I needed to create a routine that would make the Witches turn into competition winners, too. Sigh. One more thing on my

schedule, which was already full of tutoring and catch-up sessions that I wasn't sure I could handle. Whipping this squad into competition-worthy material wasn't going to be a cakewalk, either. These were cheerleaders hooked on magic. Routine floor moves bored them stiff, and it showed.

I dug up my last shred of positive attitude to smile at everyone. "That's a great way to look at it, Coach. I did feel guilty about asking, though. She was so unhappy with me. I guess she's still mad."

"Too bad." Tara wasn't as sympathetic as a good team member should be. But that wasn't surprising—she was head cheerleader and Coach was paying a little too much attention to the newest, weakest member of the squad. I couldn't really blame her. Although I wanted some big-time squad-level sympathy right now.

Fortunately, the other girls were ignoring Tara's lead. I suppose they wanted the details badly enough that they couldn't pretend not to care. "What happened? Did she give you another detention?"

"No." Just a few hard truths that made me feel like I'd tried to crash the Oscars wearing Kmart sweats. Good thing too, I had had a taste of witch detention—buried up to the neck in a vat of sand—and I definitely didn't want more of that. "She just said no test right now and popped my mom and me back home before we could blink."

“Wow! Your mom, too?” That was impressive to meek little Sunita, who apparently had a slightly hidden streak of bloodthirstiness. “I bet she wanted to expel you. Daniel was—is—the apple of her eye.”

I nodded, going with the flow of sympathy. “How can Daniel’s magic hacking and habit of running away be my fault?” Not to mention his ability to send me anonymous messages via ghost mail. But somehow I suspected that if Agatha ever found out, she would find a way to *make* it my fault.

“I wouldn’t have passed up a kiss in a time bubble with that boy.” Whoever said that had projected her voice from the other side of the gym to preserve her anonymity, but several of the girls were nodding vigorously at the sentiment.

Coach frowned at the way the conversation was going off the subject. “Sometimes I think we made a mistake when we decided to teach boys and girls together. We’d get a whole lot more learning into you girls if you weren’t mooning after boys half the day.”

That didn’t sound fair to me, although it seemed like all the parents and teachers thought it at one time or another—even back in Beverly Hills there had been grumbling about mixing the sexes being more volatile than nitroglycerin.

Sure, I hadn’t run screaming from the bad boy who’d teased me and flirted with me during my first weeks of school. One, he was cute, and two, he was . . . Daniel. He

had treated me as if I were kowl from the first day, when he sent erasers flying at my face, to the last, when he made a time bubble to get around my mother's protective spell, which set off alarms if I was alone with a boy for more than a minute.

A part of me wished Daniel *were* still here, that he hadn't run away. But the sane part of me knew I'd have zero chance of ever catching up on my magical education if I had Daniel around to nudge me into breaking rules and taking chances that nobody as unskilled at magic as I was should risk.

"Maybe it's the kiss she's steamed about." I couldn't see who had said that, but since everyone giggled, I figured it was something they were all thinking. Funny how rumors could spread around school when there wasn't anyone who actually witnessed Daniel kiss me. Or me kiss him back.

I shrugged. "The kiss, okay. But last I checked, that's not a punishable offense. All the good that logic does me, since Agatha doesn't have to be reasonable about the grudges she holds."

Coach shook her head. "Prudence, I know you are disappointed, but I assure you that our headmistress does not let grudges factor in when she makes serious educational decisions."

"Right." A whisper had been directed to my ear only. It was Tara—I recognized her voice even at a whisper.

Apparently she had gotten sucked into the sympathy-fest, but she wasn't going to admit it in front of Coach. "And rumor has it she never lets grudges go, either."

Yvette—a cheerleader with some promise, if she could just control the fact that she frowned rather than smiled when she was happy—asked, "What are you going to do?"

Not a question I wanted to answer. But I knew what I had to say, no matter how I felt right now: "Study hard and try again." Which was not only the truth, but also the only right answer for someone who wanted to be head cheerleader next year. So I didn't tell them about the hardest part, which was turning my back on all things mortal. They were witches, and it would be like telling fish I was going to turn my back on air. No-brainer—unless you were used to being a fish out of water, or a witch living without magic.

"Good for you!" Coach raised her fist in a solidarity cheer.

"Sooner or later, she has to let me test out." I said it with conviction, but the girls surrounding me didn't echo the sentiment with a confidence-boosting murmur of affirmation. In fact, they looked worried. I spent a horrible few seconds thinking they believed I was too magically deficient to take the test.

Until Tara said, "Sometimes you just have to accept that a teacher—or the headmistress—has it in for you."

The other girls all nodded, and I realized that they didn't

have a clue how incompetent I was at magic. They just thought Agatha hated me too much to ever bend the rules for me.

I felt a solid-gold moment of team solidarity, especially when Tara said, "But don't let it affect your attitude in practice and at games and it won't be a problem for us." She smiled at me, and I was, for one second, a team member like every other girl. Until she said, "Ten laps for being late."

Sigh. At least ten laps was better than two hundred push-ups. And the advantage of doing laps at witch school was that they're flying laps, not running. Which I remembered right after I started into a jog. I covered well enough by pretending I'd used the jog to jump-start the leap into flight. I hope. Because when kids said Agatha could see through walls, they weren't entirely kidding.



Chapter 3



Agatha was right. As I struggled every second to stop doing things the mortal way, I realized just how much I thought like a mortal. I didn't mind doing things the mortal way. How hard was it to pull on a pair of jeans or tie a pair of sneakers? For me, it was ten times easier than to remember to use a fashionista incantation or a tying spell. And we won't go into the little glitches that occurred when I tried to use magic. Like the time I accidentally tied my bra strap and my thong together instead of my shoelaces. Ouchie.

Don't get me wrong, I didn't have anything against mortals. I mean, my dad is one. The trouble with mortals isn't that they don't have mega-lifespans (witches don't live for-

ever, but compared with mortals, we're an order of magnitude more long-lived). It's that they can't do magic, so they refuse to believe it exists. They're pretty much clueless. And so was I, for my first sixteen years. Which meant I had a lot of clues to gather up and put together, pronto.

When I left Agatha's office, I thought it wouldn't be that hard to close my eyes to the mortal realm—except for dealing with my dad and cheering at the regionals. But it turned out to be as easy as going clubbing after a day of liposuction and a full-body lift.

You see, I'd forgotten that moving to a new state, a new town, and a new neighborhood meant new neighbors. And sometimes it meant neighbors who liked to roll out the welcome mat, whether you liked it or not.

Just to be clear, I'm not referring to the ghosts who live in our house, and lived there way before we moved in. Or the witches, like Grandmama, who popped in and out. No. I mean the mortal neighbors who lived in the nicely cared for houses next to ours.

Mom and Dad had picked this new house because it just happened to exist in a nexus between both the mortal and witch realms. So the Dorklock and I could pop off to school without a lot of transfers and delays, and Dad could take his Beemer to the train station and commute to the city, while Mom stayed home and did . . . whatever it is she does. You know, the typical routine for a half-witch, half-mortal family.

Until my promise to cut out the mortal stuff, this wasn't difficult—even Agatha couldn't complain if we occasionally waved at our mortal neighbors if we happened to be leaving when they were coming home, or vice versa. But I hadn't factored in one little neighborly botheration: A smokin' guy. Mortal, naturally. The casserole in his hands was a dead giveaway.

Back in Beverly Hills, when I was living among mortals, finding out that a hottie lived next door would involve a lot of text messaging and a few pictures taken on the q.t. with the cell phone. Now I'm in witchworld and not doing the mortal thing, I guess I should be glad my best friend, Maddie, took advantage of my absence from Beverly Hills High to make a move on my longtime crush. I got so mad when someone sent me a picture of them together, I gave my phone to the geek who'd been tutoring me. He was obsessed by all things mortal (he could afford to be—no one at Agatha's had a better handle on magic than he did), and I didn't want a reminder that my old life was sooo over. But every now and then, I did miss my phone.

So with no cell phone to snap a picture, and no best friend to text about this neighbor, plus the knowledge that even wanting those things was bad (how mortal of me!), I stood there in my living room smiling at him and really hating my vow to turn my back on all things mortal.

He'd come in tow behind his mother, who had made him

carry the big welcome-to-the-neighborhood casserole she'd cooked up for us. At first I didn't even notice he was more than cute, because his mother was one of those annoyingly bigger-than-life people who took all the oxygen out of a room the second they start to speak.

Which she did as soon as my mother opened the door. It was late afternoon, after practice, so everyone was home except for my dad. "Welcome to the neighborhood. I'm sorry it has taken me so long to get over and give you a proper welcome, but my husband and I took a little vacation to France to celebrate our anniversary and we're just now back."

Mom just stood there, looking like she wished she hadn't opened the door wide enough that the neighbor had been able to walk right into the living room and start assessing our stuff. "Thank you. But you didn't have to—"

"Nonsense. No one new in this neighborhood will ever say that Myrna Kenton shirked her duty to roll out the welcome mat." Even if she had to roll it out right over the wishes of her newest neighbors.

Mrs. Kenton was highly annoying, with one of those cheerful snoop personalities that took stock of the teensy bit of dust on the baseboards as she extolled how wonderful the neighborhood was. She instructed her son to give the casserole to my mother and immediately began trying to convince Mom to join the Neighborhood Watch. As if.

Since I wasn't too fond of Mom for landing us in the witch's brew that is Salem, I enjoyed watching her squirm this way and that to avoid agreeing to a mortal form of torture worse than detention at Agatha's.

I was only mildly curious about the mortal boy standing in my living room. Until Mrs. Kenton waved her arm like a circus ringmaster and said grandly, "I want to introduce you to my son, Angelo. He's known around the neighborhood as the one to go to when you want your yard work done well."

"That's great." Mom smiled warmly at him. She approved of people who work hard, even if they were cute teenage boys who might distract her daughter from her vow of mortal celibacy. "This is my daughter, Prudence."

Angelo looked at me and smiled. "Hello, Prudence. That's a neat name."

And the world stopped. I mean it. Despite the fact that no one in his right mind would think Prudence was a neat name, Angelo's attention had turned on me like a hot spotlight on a stand-up comedian. Tag, I'm it. And it feels good.

Mrs. Kenton ignored the vibes that had to have been flashing neon bright between her darling son and the new neighbor girl. She had a mission and she wasn't going to let a little teenage chemistry experiment interrupt her. "As a welcome to the neighborhood, Angelo will rake your leaves this week. We leave them out on the curb on Friday by 6 A.M."

Mom's smile wasn't so big anymore now that she had looked away from Angelo and back to Mrs. Kenton. "How generous. But you don't have to do that for us."

The idea of a mortal in our yard, possibly looking in our windows, was not something any of us wanted. We'd been there and done that back in Beverly Hills, even before we were allowed to do magic inside our own home.

Mrs. Kenton turned out to be the type who couldn't take a hint unless you followed it by pointing a can of pepper spray in her face and counting to three. "Nonsense! I'm sure you're busy moving in and just haven't had time to get to it. Think of it as a welcome to the neighborhood gift."

I took my eyes off the gorgeous Angelo for a second to look at his mother. Mrs. Kenton reminded me of Ms. Darbley, a neighbor we'd had back in Beverly Hills. Maybe every neighborhood had one—the busybody who kept an eye on things and never thought anyone else kept their yard or house well, parked their car in the right place, or put their trash out at the right time. Of course, Ms. Darbley hadn't had a son who was so hot, he could scorch a girl's bread to toast in about two seconds flat.

"Really, you don't have to do that." Mom, never one to give up even in the face of intractable busybodies, pointed to Tobias, who just happened to be sitting in the living room playing his favorite video game. "We have our own resident raker and mower."

This was an out-and-out lie. Sure, Tobias took care of the yard—after Mom and Dad nagged him enough and forbade him video games until he did it. But now that we were in Salem and embracing all things witch, he acted like doing anything the mortal way was beneath him. Brat. That was just one of many reasons why I preferred to call him Dorklock.

“Nonsense!” Mrs. Kenton was as pushy as Ms. Darbley had been. Poor Mom. I bet she’d been glad to escape Ms. Darbley, who’d always been dropping in at inconvenient times. I couldn’t remember how many times Mom had had to wipe Ms. Darbley’s mind when she saw something she shouldn’t have. And that was back in Beverly Hills, when we only did magic when Mom was “helping” Dad out, Tobias was misbehaving, or when my grandmama visited. I couldn’t even imagine what it would be like now, when Tobias and I were popping and summoning and casting spells every day. If Mrs. Kenton wasn’t careful, she was likely to have her mind wiped on a daily basis.

The trouble was, Mom hated wiping mortal minds. She only did it when there was absolutely no other way. Which meant she would not want Mrs. Kenton dropping in unannounced or Angelo doing our yard work. All I could say, in the case of Mom versus Kenton? Good night and good luck, Mom. And maybe I was just a teensy bit glad that Mrs. Kenton would win this round. Angelo could be fun—and a little dangerous—to have around.

I left Mom and Mrs. Kenton to their polite social stand-off and turned my attention back to Angelo. He was looking at Tobias, who was playing his video game with less than zero interest in what was going on with the rest of us.

Angelo was tall. Over six feet for sure, although I wasn't great about judging height. He shaved. I could see the faint blue-black stubble on his jaw. I guessed he was probably a junior or senior at least.

Lots of words came to mind the first time I saw Angelo. Forget "cute," it was so not up to the task of describing him. Try hot. Scorching. Sizzling. I wanted to see if the rest of him lived up to the first impression.

And yes, I was playing with fire. So sue me.

I aimed my best cheer-worthy smile at Angelo. "How long have you lived in Salem?"

He looked away from Tobias and focused his blue eyes on me. "Oh, my mom's side of the family came over on the *Mayflower*. So I guess that means I've been here forever."

Suddenly I didn't care about the new mortal-free rules. That boy could smile. It was like a beacon, and all I wanted to do was spend a little quality time with a mortal very appropriately named Angelo.

I've had crushes before, on a couple of mortal boys back in Beverly Hills, and one on my math teacher at Agatha's, Mr. Bindlebrot. And a really big one on Daniel. I knew crushes come on hard and strong, like the rush of a cheering

crowd when the quarterback runs twenty yards for an unexpected touchdown. But when I looked at Angelo . . . wow! I'd never had a crush that came on like a bolt of lightning. For a second I forgot to breathe. And I definitely suffered a moment of amnesia about the witch/mortal thing that Agatha had warned me about.

Despite the fact my brains were so scrambled, I probably sounded like a total spaz, we managed a little back-and-forth info dump in the time it took my mother to convince his mother she wasn't interested in participating in the Neighborhood Watch. I started with the basics. "Are you still in high school?" I was pretty sure he was, but I found that boys liked it when a girl thought he might actually be old enough for college.

He nodded, and a dimple curved in his left cheek. I took that as a sign he was pleased I had to ask. Score one for me. "A junior."

Even though I knew I shouldn't be happy about it, I was. "Me too." That meant he wouldn't be heading off to college next year. If I was still stuck in Salem, at least I'd have a hottie neighbor to keep me warm.

"I haven't seen you around much." The way he said it, it sounded like he thought that was way too bad.

"I've been busy studying. My new school is tough."

"Don't tell me you're at Salem High and I haven't noticed you yet. I don't believe I would have missed you."

Oops. The compliment made me feel a little melty. But it panicked me too. Already we were encountering a big rift in the mortal-witch divide. Sigh. "I go to a private school. That's why my mom and dad moved us here in the first place."

"Oh?" His dimple disappeared, which I refused to believe meant anything besides that he was disappointed. I knew I sure was.

I shrugged, to show him it wasn't my choice. "Parents. What can you do? They think the school is the best."

He nodded, with a quick glance at his mother, who was still extolling the virtues of serving on Neighborhood Watch. "Do you like it?"

A normal boy might have gotten points off for such a dumb question. But even a dumb question like that couldn't take any of the heat out of Angelo's hottitude. "Does *anyone* like school, except teachers and parents?"

The dimple came back. "Good. Then you're normal, even if you do go to private school."

"As normal as any other girl stuck following her parents across country and starting a new school in junior year." If you consider a witch normal. Which, I guess, I still didn't. I wondered how long it would take me to accept that I can do magic? Probably a really long time if I kept flirting with mortal boys. The conversation gets tricky, fast.

For example, when Angelo, in all his sexy innocence—is

that what they mean by oxymoron?—asked, “What’s the name of your school?”

Great. Do you think the “witches” in Agatha’s Day School for Witches might be a clue that I wasn’t as mortal as I looked? Sigh. “Agatha’s School for . . . Girls.”

“Oh. You go to an all-girls school.” That seemed to be a plus, judging by the way his dimple deepened.

Unfortunately, I needed to erase the plus factor. “No. We have boys, too.” I had to confess that, just in case Angelo ever ran into Samuel, the mega-geeklock from Agatha’s who was tutoring me a couple of nights a week. No way was Angelo going to believe Samuel was a girl. “The school is actually called Agatha’s Day School for Girls and Boys. I just always leave off the ‘boys’.”

“That’s harsh.” He was grinning, so I knew he hadn’t taken it personally.

“Just realistic.” I teased. “Guys care more about cars and sports than classes, don’t you agree?”

“No, I wouldn’t, actually.” He got serious for a second, but there was still a twinkle in his eye and the dimple hadn’t completely disappeared. “Take me. I get good grades, I play for the basketball team, I edit the student newspaper, and this year I’m even student council vice president.”

“Wow. So where do you want to go to college? Harvard or MIT?” That may not have seemed like the next logical

question, but only if you weren't in high school and weren't driven to get out and make a success of yourself. Which Angelo obviously was, because he was exactly where I had been before I'd been yanked out of Beverly Hills and my nice comfy life in the mortal realm. I felt a little twinge of envy. Okay. A *big* twinge.

He grinned again. "Wrong on both counts. Berkeley."

"Aha. California. You'll love it." So he wasn't as strait-laced as he seemed, was he? Interesting. Too bad he was still a mortal and thus completely and utterly out-of-bounds for me as boyfriend material, the crush that was making it hard for me to breathe notwithstanding.

There was just a beat before he returned my interest. "What about you?"

I loved being asked, even though I really didn't know the answer. "I want to be a pediatrician. I thought I might go to Duke." True enough, before my life turned upside down. But now? Who knew.

"Not Harvard?"

I shrugged. "Maybe. But it's not my first choice. I've only second-listed it on my SATs."

"Me too."

I spent a moment contemplating what it would be like if both Angelo and I got second-listed to Harvard together. But as soon as I got to the part of the daydream where I wanted to pop myself from here to there rather than waste

time walking or driving, *snap*, I was back to reality—witch reality, á la Agatha.

Mrs. Kenton glanced over at us and, I guess, got a little worried about how cozy Angelo and I looked. She stood up straighter—which I would have said was impossible if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. "Angelo. We're going to be late for the dojo."

She smiled at Mom as she hustled to the door. "He's going for his third-degree black belt next week."

Angelo glanced at his mother before he reached out and took my hand. His was warm and strong, and if he'd been a witch, I'd have guessed he had a Fire Talent because there was a current vibing between us. "I'm so glad my mother made me come over here with that casserole."

"Me too." I didn't want to let go of his hand.

He didn't seem to notice or try to pull his hand away. "I could use a friend who gets the importance of second listing Harvard on the SATs."

"Me, too." Okay, so I sounded less original than a parrot. But in my defense, when Angelo was around, my brain just melted into a puddle of me toos. It must've been the lightning-crush effect. I have to confess, I liked it way more than I should. Because Agatha was watching, and Angelo was definitely on the no-no list.



Chapter 4



I said, Brrr, it's cold in here!

Witches must be in the atmosphere!

I said, Brrrr, it's time to light a flame!

Witches, burn the court and shout our name!

Confession time: Practice was more fun in Salem than it had been in Beverly Hills. Don't get me wrong—my old team was awesome, and they deserved their three national championship wins. And I'm not saying it wasn't a ton harder to cheer in witch 3-D. But the special effects were beyond rad. For example, when we did our take on the traditional brr, it's cold cheer, we made snow fall from the ceiling and land gently on our heads and shoulders—and then made it disappear before it

hit the floor and turned things slippery. My old team would wear last year's style for a chance to do something like that.

It wasn't just the special effects, either. The regular moves were off the hook when you didn't need to stand on the floor or have eight sweaty hands holding your legs. I mean, back in Beverly Hills I could do a split on the floor. And a fine-looking split too, even if it wasn't the most dramatic move, what with all the triple backflips nowadays. Here at Agatha's? I had my pick of floor, wall, and ceiling beams. Or I could just hang in midair. Kewl, for sure. If I could figure out how to do it without looking like a twenty-four-karat idiot.

I know you're not supposed to worry about messing up when you're learning at warp speed, but my rep couldn't afford another hit on the competence front. My status on the team was shaky enough already. I didn't need the girls to know that my magic skills were not only rusty but possibly poser-alert level. Of course, I knew there were whispers. With girls, there are always whispers. We can't help it. When we're not talking out loud to each other, we're whispering behind each other's backs. That was one of the few things that translated from Beverly Hills High to Agatha's.

So far, I'd managed to head the whispers off with a smile and a slightly sad glance away. Let them think I keep my Talent to myself. That I don't like to show off. That I'm still adjusting to life in Salem. Anything is better than the truth.

But every time I hesitated to perform a stunt during practice

because I was afraid I'd do something lame like use the floor instead of hover in midair like I was supposed to, I knew there were poser-seeking cheerleader eyes looking for my weak spot.

Not that I blamed them for being on constant poser alert. It's necessary to know if you can trust your teammates in cheerleading. Otherwise you may end up with a split lip or a broken leg. Or worse, look like a dork with pom-poms. So if I wanted to be a cheerleader, I had to live with the fact that my secret could come out: I was not a very good witch. At least, not yet. I refused to give up on forever unless I did something horrendous like turn myself into a ten-foot purple python. With feathers. Not that I worried about it a lot. Only every third breath or so.

And so despite the kewl moves, practice could be a little stressful. Especially the day Coach Gertie blew her whistle and called my name. "Prudence, if we're going to have a chance to win the regionals, we need to know what we don't know. So I'd like you to tell us how we can win our first competition."

I had been practicing walking on a ceiling beam with the confidence I used to have on the balance beam—before I had a humiliating dive-and-spew incident during tryouts—when her voice boomed out. I nearly fell off the beam before I caught myself and smiled down at Coach Gertie like I welcomed the opportunity to be front and center for show-and-tell.

She turned to the thunderstruck Tara, who had stopped practicing her dive rolls in mid-dive, and gestured to the

other girls to stop their practice too. “Wouldn’t that be wonderful? To show what the Witches can do by winning our first-ever competition?”

There was a halfhearted cheer of agreement. Not the best introduction to the idea of winning. But I knew I needed to take what I had and turn it around if I wanted anyone—including me—to believe I had what it took to be head cheerleader next year.

So I floated down off my beam in a split (I’d practiced that simple move for eight hours straight in my room at home). I waited until I hit the floor in perfect form to say, “I only know one way to become a great cheerleading squad. And that’s to work hard to perform each move as sharply and as in sync with everyone else as you can.”

“It’s hard to be in sync when you work with tone-deaf team members.” Elektra thought she should be the star of the show. But I didn’t have to worry about taking care of her, Tara did that just fine. She wasn’t about to let another girl steal her place as head cheerleader *and* head witch-bitch too.

“No one can be in sync with you, Elektra, or you’ll smack them in the face because you keep forgetting you’re not the only one on the floor.” Tara snarked back, with an aim so perfect that Elektra blushed bright red with rage and humiliation.

“Enough bickering, girls. Pru has the floor,” Coach Gertie said, ignoring the fact that she was the only one watching me with any interest at all.

I smiled as if I didn't know my leadership was as welcome as an Earth shoe lover at a beauty pageant. It was one thing to compete, another to let the new girl—who couldn't even fly straight and throw a razzle-dazzle spell at the same time—teach you. “Keeping in sync—to the music and to each other—isn't as easy as it looks when you see a team performing perfectly. That's why we need to practice each move until we can do it without thinking about it. So that those of us who need a little boost in keeping the beat can memorize the routines and the music.”

“So what's the secret of your old team, Pru?” asked Tara. “That they have boring mortal lives and can waste time practicing until they can do their routines in their sleep?”

Well, yes. Although I had never thought the mortal life was boring. Especially on a cheerleading squad. There'd been lots of solidarity and even more drama.

“Look.” I decided it would be a waste of *my* time to try to convince them they wouldn't be wasting *their* time. Proof was what they needed, and proof required two important things: time and patience. “I can tell you all about practice making perfect, but you're not going to believe me until you see it working. True?”

They all nodded.

“So I'm asking you to give me two weeks. Do what I ask for those two weeks, and then you'll have your proof.”

“And if we give you those two weeks and Elektra still breaks

my nose?" Tara had her hands on her hips and a frown on her face. So much for my inspiring the team to a new fully synchronized level. "How do we get all that time back?"

"What's two weeks to you?" I stopped short of reminding them that they lived ten times longer than mortals do. To me, that mattered because of my dad. But to them? Irrelevant. "Isn't it worth it to have a shot at winning?"

"If we could use magic, we'd kick mortal butt." Elektra was still angry that Tara had dissed her. "What's the big deal about beating mortals, anyway?"

"Well, beating mortals would show we have what it takes to be the best cheering team ever, no matter the ground rules!" I replied, putting on my best "Go team!" smile.

Elektra giggled, a touch nastily. "Ground rules rule!"

Coach interrupted. "I want a show of hands. How many girls think we can win a mortal competition without magic?"

No one raised their hand at first, so Coach barked out, "Hands! Now!"

Five hands went up. Then eight. Finally, all fifteen of them had their hands in the air.

Coach looked at me and I realized I hadn't raised my hand. I punched my fist up into the air and said, "I can give you four rules to follow that will make sure we have a shot at placing in the regional competitions."

"Don't we have enough rules?" Elektra was clearly going to be a problem. Great. Just what I needed when I wasn't

even sure I could figure out how to convince girls who could fly that floor moves could be kewl.

“Stop complaining, Elektra.” Tara came to my rescue, but I had a feeling she wasn’t any happier than Elektra. Especially when she added, “Maybe Pru’s going to tell us we need to eat ice cream and dance around in a circle naked.”

“Rules are annoying, I agree,” I said. I wasn’t new to this leadership biz, so I knew that a little rebellion in the beginning was nothing to worry about. It was later—a week from now, two weeks from now—that would really tell me whether or not I could get these witches to become the kind of team that looks out for each other on and off the field. “But the four I’m going to give you are important so we can each do our personal best and enhance each other’s personal best.”

“This I’ve got to see,” someone sneered. Not Elektra or Tara. Which told me that I had more than two reluctant cheerleaders to convince.

I was glad for the anonymous sneer, though. I’d been about to *tell* them the rules. To revert to boring old lecture mode. But that was the mortal way. Now that I lived in witchworld, I could use the witch way. So I did.

I had been practicing writing in the air with glowy letters every chance I got because I needed to keep up in all my classes. Even my math and history teachers made us write in the air for problems and short answers. It seemed like a good idea to see how well I could do on large scale.

I decided to put my letters up against the bland white wall. R U L E S. I made them hot pink, with a little ruby gleam at the edge. They were gorgeous, if I do say so myself. Then I added F O R G R E A T C H E E R I N G.

I turned to stand between the girls and the wall writing. I summoned pom-poms to my hands and shook them a little, down by my hips. “Rule One.” As I spoke, the numeral **1** appeared on the wall. I was feeling pretty proud of myself, even though the girls were looking wary. “Moves should be performed so sharply, it’s like you have a sheet of glass at your back at all times.” The words gleamed against the wall. The girls looked puzzled.

I kept going. “Rule two. Wrists should not be cocked.” I demonstrated as I spoke. “Keep them in a straight line with your arms—and always keep your shoulders relaxed.” I shrugged my shoulders up to my ears. “Tense shoulders make tense crowds.”

I had hoped the girls would giggle even though my joke was lame, but no go. So I went on. The numeral **3** appeared against the wall. “Three. The shortest distance is the way to go for any move. Don’t swing your arms or legs wide. KISS means Keep It Short, Sweetheart.”

That line had never failed to get me a giggle, even from the most experienced, competitive cheerleaders. Until today. The Salem Witches were a tough crowd.

“Last rule. Four. Practice every move in a mirror. A move

may feel right but look wrong—you need to be able to perform perfectly.” I pointed to the wall. “Remember that sheet of glass in number one? Well, that’s what you need reflected back at you in the mirror before you can be absolutely certain the crowd will see it at a game or a competition.”

Several of the girls chimed in together. “We don’t have any mirrors in here.”

Coach Gertie stepped forward and said, “I’ll ask Agatha if I can pop some in for our practices. I can’t imagine she’d object.”

“Great!” I, personally, could imagine she’d object. After all, I was the one who had asked for them. Not to mention that I, who was supposed to be giving up everything mortal, was asking for mirrors so the cheering team could compete with mortals. Two strikes already. But there wasn’t anything I could do about it except hope Agatha wouldn’t refuse Coach Gertie’s request just because of me.

“Show us some of the moves, Pru,” Coach urged me.

The girls looked a bit skeptical, but if I couldn’t show them why they shouldn’t be, I really should just throw in the pretty pink cheer towel right now.

“Okay.” I could play show-and-tell Barbie when I had to. “This is Ready Position, as sharp as I can make it.” I demonstrated for them, facing them with my best cheerleader-to-the-stars smile.

I moved into a lunge, wondering why I felt awkward

performing moves that I'd been doing since the summer before seventh grade. "This one is a Lunge."

"High V." I held my arms up. I wanted to say, "I surrender!" but I didn't. I was a good show-and-tell Barbie and pointed out how I made the move as sharp as I could. "See how my wrists and arms are in a line and my wrists don't cock?"

There wasn't even a nod from the girls watching. Sigh.

I went through the rest of the moves very quickly, as if I were performing them in front of a crowd who wanted our team to win and there were only seconds on the clock.

"Low V."

"T."

"Broken T."

"Left K."

"Right K."

"Touch Down."

"Low Touch Down."

"Daggers." Boy did I wish I had some to throw at the crowd right now. Anything that would wake them up. The only one who seemed to care at all was Coach. And she wasn't going to perform the moves—she was just going to see that we got into the competition.

"Punch is another one where it matters to avoid cocking your wrists." I punched the air.

"Thank you, Pru. Excellent job." Coach Gertie smiled.

She was the only one, but she didn't seem to notice that as she asked, "Who wants to try it?"

There was an overwhelming no-show of hands. And then a pinwheel sign, complete with fireworks, appeared on the ceiling: N O T H A N K S, C O A C H!

It was spectacular as it sputtered and flared for a moment, then disappeared, leaving perfect smoke letters to make sure the message got across without a shred of doubt remaining.

Great. As a leader, I ranked right up there with every general whose men didn't even know his name.

I was rescued from total humiliation by Coach Gertie's whistle. "Practice is over, girls. Next time, we'll break up into two groups and Tara can work on flying with one group while Pru works with the other on getting our groundwork into shape for competition."

Okay. So maybe she didn't save my bacon as much as toss it into a different frying pan. Tara was not looking at me with a fond expression. But, hey, a girl like me needed every break she could get in witchworld. And it hadn't escaped my notice that if I couldn't, for some reason, manifest a Talent and turn my back on everything mortal, then it would be useful to have at least one skill that could translate into kewl. At least kewl enough to get me through my last two years of high school at Agatha's.



Chapter 5



Dinner with the 'rents was never number one on my list of top ten favorite things to do. But this no-mortal-ways-allowed twist gave it a whole new spin—one that sometimes gave me heartburn before I'd taken two bites out of whatever my mother had popped onto the table for us.

Sure, when I was mad at my dad, I didn't even mind that he got hyper-focused on his peas and carrots when the Dorklock and I casually floated the salt and pepper shakers over. And I was the first to appreciate that there's something to be said for having your dad know you could dangle his dinner over his head if you felt like it. Not that I ever would. But it was nice to think about when I was getting the obligatory third degree.

That night it began the exact same way it always did—no variation, no escape: “How was school today, Pru?” Before, when we lived in Beverly Hills, there would be a smile on Dad’s face. He knew it was going to be good news and nothing but. Now? All bad news, all the time. Worse, for him, he had no suggestions for how I might learn to create a potion that didn’t set off the class explosion alert charm. And my dad didn’t like not having suggestions for how I could turn failure into success faster than he could whip out an ad to make old people vitamins sound sexy.

“I had fun at lunch.” Which was code for “Can we drop this?”

Dad, ignoring the code, stayed in interrogation mode. “Have you brought your math grade up?”

Good. He was focusing on mortal classes. “No worries, I’m back on track there.” Perfectly true, if “back on track” equals “going to pass the quarter.”

“And”—he could barely bring himself to say it—“the other stuff?”

“Mr. Phogg says I’m making real progress.” Again, true. If you didn’t count that he said it right after I materialized a rabbit out of a hat that immediately burst into flame. I got the kudos because I materialized a bucket of water and dumped it on the burning hat on my own initiative.

So, okay, I didn’t tell my dad the worst stuff. And I padded the good stuff the way women had to pad their bras

before breast implants. But, really, how many ways are there to say “horrible” without sounding like you’re waving the little white flag of surrender? Especially when I could tell Dad secretly wanted me to whip out the flag so life could get back to normal?

Before Dad could think of another question I didn’t want to answer, Mom changed the subject. “Angelo is a nice boy.”

“Angelo?” Dad looked at me with the “What don’t I know?” look he’d been using a lot since we moved to Salem.

I shrugged in nonchalant combo with my best imitation Botox innocence.

Fortunately, my dad was not subtle. His next question was a megawatt spotlight to his biggest worry. “So Samuel’s out of the picture for you, after all that tutoring?”

Whew. Of all the questions he could’ve asked, that one was easy. “Dad! Relax. I don’t have a boyfriend. Samuel is just a friend, and Angelo is mortal.”

Mom raised an eyebrow at me for snarking at the table. “Angelo is the neighbor boy. I told you about him and his mother, Myrna Kenton.”

Dad nodded. “Oh. Our Salem version of Adalee Darbley. But Pru, do you think you should be involved with this boy now, when you have to study magic so much?” Dad winced when he said the “m” word, but just a little.

"I'm not *involved* with him, Dad. I just met him." I so didn't want to have this conversation. It was never fun to have the "Do you like him like that?" talk with your parents, no matter how much fun it was with your friends.

Apparently Mom had noticed that I had crushed on Angelo like a Mack truck landing on a rice cake. "More than nice. That young man is a true charmer." Her frown lines got a little deeper as she looked at me, as if my response mattered a lot to her.

"So? He's a mortal? He's off-limits." I probably should have stopped there, but I added, "If I ever want to get out of remedial classes, I need to smack every last bit of mortal out of me, right?"

Mom nodded, but her frown lines got even deeper. "Right."

Dad, oblivious to how upset Mom was about something as trivial as the fact that Angelo was the hottest thing since the sun had formed in our solar system, focused like a laser on that bit of 4-1-1. It was breaking news for him, and he wasn't too happy about that. "You have to smack out every last bit of *mortal*? What does that mean?"

Crappiola. If I was good at witchcraft, I'd cast a thirty-second rewind spell and we'd be good to go. But I wasn't. And Mom thought it was disloyal to cast a spell on Dad.

"Just that Pru really needs to concentrate on using her magic. You know, dear," Mom said as she popped another

of his favorite rolls on his plate, “like when you had that marketing conference in France and we spoke French for six weeks, just so you could become fluent?”

“Oh. Of course. I see.” Dad nodded and dropped the subject. There was still a puzzled crease in his forehead, but we were no longer headed into forbidden territory.

Dad still had one lingering question, I guess. Because, after he took a sip of wine, he asked, “So Angelo is hotter than Samuel, is he?”

Right. As if hot and Samuel had any place in the same sentence. “Samuel’s just a friend.” Sometimes I thought Dad liked Samuel because he was a witch who didn’t need to show off in front of the witch-aware mortal like Grandmama did. Or it could be they both belonged to some kind of psychic geek brotherhood that was stronger than the witch-mortal divide.

Apparently, we were back in interrogation mode because Mom looked at me with raised eyebrows. “Does he know that?”

“Mooom!” I so did not want to try to explain the whole kowl kid versus fringie kid social system that existed at Agatha’s. It was hard enough to stay kowl if you dared to be friends with a fringie, never mind macking on one. And even if, somehow, Samuel had become my best friend in Salem, I was definitely not interested in hooking up with him. Except in the sense that I wished I could hook his

brain to mine and download all the magic smarts into it. Come to think of it, I'd have to see if there was a spell for that. It would be just like Samuel to "forget" to tell me that there was.

Mom held up her hands, surrendering the argument. "Okay, okay. He's just such a sweet boy, I don't want to see you break his heart."

"I'm not going to break his heart. He's just a *friend*." A friend with a crush on me. But not the kind of crush that wouldn't go away if he found a girlfriend of his own. I wondered if I should make that a priority. I did owe him for all the help he'd given me in catching up on sixteen years of magic education. "And Angelo is off-limits as long as he's mortal," I added, "Just call me dateless-in-Salem." I'd hoped for a little sympathy, but they both looked pleased. Parents. Go figure.

"Understood." Mom couldn't quite leave it alone. "Even so, you should probably restrict your 'interests' to the boys at school for now."

"*Not* boys like that Daniel, either. Or your mother will have to put a boy repelling charm on you." It was Dad's turn to frown at me. I couldn't believe he'd threatened me with my mother's magic. He'd never done that before. And, really, he'd been even more unhappy than Mom to find out I'd actually been caught in a time bubble with a boy. I think that the protective charms Mom cast over us were the first

and only magic that Dad wholeheartedly approved of. Which made me glad he was a mortal. I bet if he were a witch, he'd have created a magical bubble wrap that the Dorklock and I would never escape. My dad may be a mortal, but he's a very creative mortal, which is why his advertising agency let him move to their offices across the country on very short notice.

I ignored the threat. What did it matter? I was already as good as boy proof at Agatha's. "My 'interests'?" Sometimes I could really tell that Mom had been born four hundred years ago. "Like I'm much of a catch—I'm in remedial magic classes." I had to stop saying that aloud. It might accidentally become my slogan. And it was definitely not a slogan I wanted to adopt—or to have adopt me, either. "My interests are studying hard enough to get into regular classes as soon as Agatha lets me, and getting my team to competition level before Regionals. Until then, I have a big glowing L on my forehead and there's no one in school who doesn't know it."

Oops. I'd let the L word slip. My dad hated that word. He'd always hated it, even back in Beverly Hills. But here in Salem . . . I really wished I hadn't said it, because now I was in for a huge Pru-is-great fest.

"You're not a loser, Pru." He smiled weakly at me, but his voice was strong and confident. "Your coach put you in charge of getting the team ready for Regionals, didn't she?"

“True.” Okay. So I shouldn’t have whined. But since I’d decided that Maddie was dead to me, I had had no one to complain to. And apparently, damming up your complaints about the suckitude of your life can lead to volcanic eruptions of self-pity. “But I can’t even cheer in magic games, only in mortal games. I’m probably never going to get out of remedial classes and I bet I never manifest a Talent. By twenty-five, I’ll probably die a bitter old cat-lady-witch-reject!”

Mom joined in the “rally Pru” effort. “Despite your magical shortcomings, Coach Gertie has faith in you. Shouldn’t you have faith in yourself?” Sometimes I wondered if she would have been a cheerleader if she hadn’t been born in Puritan Salem back when a good cheer would have landed her in the stocks.

“Right. Everybody wants to listen to the witch who was raised in the mortal world. It’s probably only a matter of weeks before I become Notorious Pru, the girl everyone else avoids so as not to catch her loser cooties.”

That was a little much for Mom. “Pru, you’re being a bit melodramatic, don’t you think?”

Yes. That was the point. To tell the truth, I was surprised she had hung in there so long. My mom always wanted to soothe things that couldn’t be soothed. I wasn’t going to pretend she could. But I couldn’t say so out loud. So I just stared at her without answering.

"I know it's been hard for you."

"You think?"

"Pru." The warning was clear, but I wasn't sure I wanted to pay attention to it. "I'm trying to help you figure this out. I know this move sometimes seems like it's placed you in an impossible position. . . ." Even Mom was at a loss for an acceptable but.

And then, she smiled, very pleased with herself. She asked, oh so casually, "What about if we threw you that sweet sixteen party we had to cancel when we decided to move?"

"Too late. I turned sixteen somewhere in Idaho, driving here. Remember the chocolate cupcake with one of Tobias's gummy bears posing as a flameless candle?"

"I know. The timing of that trip was awful. But that's a perfect excuse to have a belated sweet sixteen for you. You could invite some of the kids you want to get to know, the squad, Samuel. It would be a great way to break the ice."

"Sure. Great. If anyone decided to come to the new girl's party." I tried not to think about having a real sweet sixteen party. I'd been planning one since I turned ten and found out such things existed. Having it cancelled was a disaster second only to having to move without warning. "It's too late."

Dad chimed in, happy that Mom had found a workable solution that even he could understand. "Nonsense. Your birthday is barely over."

That was quite a lie. "Birthdays only last a day, Dad. Not months."

Team Rally-Pru was not prepared to accept defeat. Dad came up with a suggestion from his bag of marketing tricks. "That's why we'd call it a belated sweet sixteen. And we could invite Maddie, too. I'd pay for her to fly here if that would make you happy."

Maddie? The mortal backstabber? No way! Not that I could explain that to Dad. He didn't get girl drama. "Forget it. You aren't going to fix my loser status with a party." It would just be another opportunity for me to risk showing everyone that I couldn't do magic like the others. Sure, Samuel hung out with me enough to know it, but he was a fringie, not one of the kewl kids. He wasn't the type to hold it against me. Which, I guess, is why he had become my best friend without my realizing it.

"Won't it help you meet some kids? Maybe let some kids see you're just like they are, even if you aren't as familiar with magic as they are?" Dad suggested.

"Great. Take away my mystery and what do they find out? That I'm a loser when it comes to summoning and spells? That I throw sweet sixteen parties like *mortals* do? No thank you very much."

Mom bit her lip at the word "mortal." Hah. Point for Pru. Not that I felt good that I'd stopped the party pressure at the source. To be honest, I may have been a teensy weensy

bit prepared to let myself be reluctantly persuaded once I'd plucked every guilt string I could find.

But no, I played the mortal card and it was a winner. Mom just sighed and said, "Whatever you choose, Prudence. I won't force you." She gave me a hug. A hug! Like that would make up for ruining my life. "Honey, you deserve a sweet sixteen party, even if you are being extra sour right now. Think about it and let me know if you decide you want one. I'm sure we could find a way to use magic to start a trend among all the students at Agatha's."

And then she popped out of the dining room before I could reply. Or pop myself to my room without saying anything, which was what I had intended to do to emphasize how unhappy I was. Apparently my mother wasn't content to destroy my life, she had to hijack my dramatic exit too.



Chapter 6



Burn that dragon!
Beat that drum!
The game's back on!
Fee fie fo fum!

Being benched at magic games was a bummer. Fortunately, we played more mortal games than magic ones, so I got to cheer more often than not. Which was one teensy good point in my life. Watching witches fly around a court—for games, and for cheering—from the sidelines gave me too much time to think about what I couldn't do.

Sure, I could practice the moves that I saw others perform. And I did. I'd covered the walls of my room with mirrors, not

from vanity, but from desperation to learn what I needed to know. But it seemed like every time our team—or theirs—cheered, there was a new move that seemed light-years beyond what I could imagine, never mind actually perform.

Maybe I *should* take my mom up on the idea of a sweet sixteen party. It might be the only way I'd ever be part of the team—as the bench warmer with the kewl hangout house.

My house certainly had potential to be a kewl hangout to high school kids. Although it had been built around the time that dinosaurs roamed the earth, it had been renovated with an indoor pool and a single-lane bowling alley. I bet witches would enjoy hanging out there, contrary to the much mistaken impression *The Wizard of Oz* had given about witches and water.

Even though I couldn't cheer at the witch/witch school games, I learned a lot just sitting on the bench watching the action as the rest of the squad performed for the crowd, sending fire from their pom-poms every time they chanted the word "burn."

Totally impressive, even without the fact that they were hovering in midair. The only thing that would have made it better was if all the cheerleaders started and stopped the burn at the same time. I couldn't tell if they were trying, but I thought maybe my lectures about needing to be precise for competition were having a small effect.

Don't get me wrong, I was proud of my team. But for

witches, apparently, synchronized movements and total dedication to teamwork was asking too much. I'd quickly observed that Agatha's team was one of the better synced ones in the witch leagues. Some of the other team's cheerleaders didn't even try to cheer as a team. They were all into individual performances. I guess no one had told them that cheering was about the team they were cheering for, not about a starlicious moment for the cheerleader.

As I watched my team flying, I thought I saw Elektra actually move out of Tara's way. Not only avoiding a collision, but creating a genuine moment of teamwork. And maybe it was just my imagination, but I think the Flying V's looked a lot sharper too. I wiggled with pride, whether it was deserved or not.

Watching the cheerleaders flying and flipping and darting, though, was a great thing for me in more than one way. I was beginning to see cheerleading in 3-D. I was even starting to visualize and create routines in 3-D, a little. As soon as I was out of remedial magic classes, I was going to rock the magic games. Until then, Tara wasn't going to give my sketchbook a look—unless it was to laugh that I used a sketchbook at all (so mortal!).

I'd been good at cheer choreography back in Beverly Hills. Maybe I could be good here in Salem, too. Mortal cheerleaders push the envelope of non-magic cheering with strength and grace and a lot of momentum. I was beginning

to imagine what all of that, plus the ability to fly and move through the air, could do.

Picture skydiving stunts who never had to land on the ground unless they wanted to. And then imagine them in cute uniforms with perfect hair, brilliant smiles, and just the right makeup to make the face—and its expressions—pop for the roaring crowd.

Best of all, knowing that I could be one of them had me thinking things like “next year” and “when I can do that.” I could close my eyes and picture a senior year with me a full member of the team. With some of my old positive vibe fueling me, I had three routines sketched out by the time the Witches won with a free throw in the last three minutes of the game. Go Witches. Go me.

The thing I was looking forward to most about cheering in a magic game is that, after the team wins, the cheerleaders get to do a mini flying intro to the bleachers. In the mortal realm, cheerleaders never introduce themselves, they just cheer.

I suppose that’s one reason why the team didn’t work together as smoothly as they should. But it was still kewl, and I couldn’t wait to join in.

Picture it. The girls line up in a straight line while they cheer:

Feel The Spirit!

Let Your Energy Burn!

Feel The Spirit!

Burn Witches Burn!

And then, with all eyes in the crowd trained on her, each girl shoots up to the ceiling as her team calls her name. “Elektra! Isabella! Ashandi! Yvette! Cora! Charity! Celestina! Geetha! Minerva! Diana! Jakeera! Marina! Sunita!”

There's a pause then, as everyone on the team bows low in the air. And then, the cheerleaders start to clap and the head cheerleader slowly, elegantly glides up and does something to wow the crowd as the team shouts, “Tara!”

As I looked on, I dreamed of what I could do if I could convince the team that sharp moves and synchronization mattered. These impressive routines would be even more wow-a-licious. In my head, I could hear the roaring crowds reacting to the perfection of our routines.

But, better than roaring crowds, I dreamed about how turning the team from pewter to platinum would cinch my being head cheerleader next year. Though right now it seemed like an impossible dream, I knew I had to try my best to make it happen or I'd never forgive myself for giving up.



Chapter 7



I was busy practicing midair dive rolls in my room when I saw Angelo swing open the iron gate to our yard. I impressed myself with my quick reaction—before he could look up at the house, and maybe directly into my window, I zapped a “see nothing” spell on it. If he looked, he would not see a girl hovering in midair. He would see curtains.

I hovered there for a moment, watching him take the rake and begin to scrape up the red and gold leaves that blanketed the yard. The “see nothing” spell was one way, so I was free to hang there and watch from the turret window in my bedroom, admiring the way his muscles worked under his black T-shirt. I’d never thought of raking as being a sexy thing to do before. No wonder his mother was so successful in getting him

business. He'd have been in demand in Beverly Hills for sure.

It was funny, though. He was handsome, easy to look at, and definitely prom worthy (a girl has to worry about such things if she wants to find the right guy by senior year). But, from far away, it was hard to believe he could melt my synapses the way he had when he'd come to visit with his mother. Don't get me wrong. It wasn't like he looked like he'd been beaten with an ugly stick since the last time I'd seen him. Not at all. I guess it was like how, in Hollywood, some totally smokin'-in-person aspiring actors just didn't translate into hot-on-screen. But even though Angelo wasn't a ten-alarm hottie from my perch on the second floor, he was still fine-looking in his T-shirt and very well-worn work jeans. Definitely a worthy distraction from my magic practice. If I'd still had my cell phone, I'd have snapped him in a second. And I've have sent Maddie the first pic with a text that read: "Melting. Send ice cubes."

I decided that Angelo looked lonely working by himself. And I was definitely ready for a break. So it seemed like nothing less than an act of human kindness to take him a glass of water. It wasn't like I was going to flirt or anything. I was just being nice. I knew he was mortal. Off-limits. Not a contestant for the Take Pru to the Prom competition. I knew that. It was just water, okay?

I was halfway down the stairs on my way to the kitchen—on tiptoe and trying to avoid any creaky places in the old

stairs—when . . . duh . . . I realized I didn't have to risk Mom asking me what I was doing sneaking down the stairs like a house thief. Not to mention why I suddenly needed to get a glass of water from the kitchen in one of the good "company" glasses.

Proud of finally being able to handle getting myself from point A to point B—as long as it was a short distance—I popped myself all the way to the front door. I also materialized a glass of water for Angelo without going into the kitchen and having Mom ask me what I was up to.

Even though I hadn't done both pieces of magic simultaneously, and I was pretty sure most witches my age could, I was feeling pretty good when I walked out the front door—opening the door the mortal way, of course, for the sake of the neighbors. Angelo stopped raking when he saw me. He leaned on the rake as I approached and looked right at me with a smile. Oh, yeah. Definitely back to skin-tingly gorgeous status now that I was up-close and personal.

"I saw you working from the window. You looked thirsty." Okay, not original, but I was already nervous because I knew if Mom caught me, she'd be mad. After the incident with Daniel, she'd been watching me a little more closely when it came to boys. It was a miracle she lifted her alone-with-a-boy-too-long charm even temporarily to let me do my marathon study sessions with Samuel. And

that probably had more to do with trusting Samuel than it did with trusting me.

I glanced at my watch. Fifty seconds left before the one-minute-alone-with-a-guy alarm charm would sound. That was my mom's way to protect me until I was older and wiser. It was the same protective spell Daniel had created a time bubble to circumvent.

Angelo, unaware of the time limit on my visit, took the glass, drained it in a few gulps, and handed it back. "Thanks. You have a great yard."

"I guess, if you like yellow and red with a big swath of brown." I looked around. There were trees, shedding leaves. The grass was turning brown. The flower beds looked huddled up in preparation for winter snow. *Forty seconds.*

"You don't like it here?" He was looking down at me, because he was so tall, so I couldn't quite see the expression in his eyes.

I remembered, a teensy bit too late, that his family had been here for generations. Great, Pru. Open mouth, insert both feet and one knee. "Does it show?"

"Kind of." He grinned at me. Apparently he didn't take offense that I wasn't insanely fond of his hometown. "But Mom says you're from Beverly Hills. Do you know any actors?" *Thirty-five seconds.*

"Not really. Some kids in my high school liked to take acting lessons and earn money as extras, but we didn't have

anyone on a series or who'd been a named character in a movie."

I confess, I was a little disappointed that he'd asked that predictable question. Not that it dimmed the wattage of his hottitude. Especially when he leaned in close to confide, "I want to go to Hollywood and act."

I was confused. "I thought you second-listed Harvard." *Twenty-five seconds.*

He nodded, as if there were no inconsistency. "Second-listing Harvard's for my mom. Berkeley—and acting—is for me."

It was my turn to grin. "If you think your mother has your life planned out for you, wait until you have an agent and a manager." Which was nothing but the cold, hard truth. No one could live within spitting distance of Hollywood and not know that fact.

His voice lowered, as if he was overwhelmed that I wasn't trying to talk him out of driving down from Berkeley for Hollywood casting calls. "So you think I'd be good enough to attract an agent?"

I thought so. I thought he'd be a big-screen superstar if he wanted to be. There was an unavoidable magnetism to him when he turned it on. But did I want to admit that? Sure, why not? "There are more smoking hot guys per square foot in the L.A. area than anywhere else. But I think you'd have a chance." *Twenty seconds.*

"Thanks." He looked genuinely pleased at my assessment that he fit right in with the smoking hot crowd, as if living in Beverly Hills made me an expert. At last, someone in Salem thought I knew something. Too bad he was mortal.

Ten seconds. I held up the empty glass. "Would you like more?"

"Sure." Just like last time, when he came to visit with his mom, I didn't want to say good-bye.

I knew the clock was ticking and I *had* to go. *Now.* Or there would be some alarms going off, one worried mother popping in out of the blue, and some serious mind-wiping to be done. And still . . . I thought of a solution. "Come on in and I'll add cookies."

Oooh. The dimple appeared, making me feel like a genius for thinking to offer food. "I never turn down cookies."

I hurried toward the house, counting down the seconds. "What's your favorite kind of cookie?"

Angelo followed, a little behind, probably because he had no idea what would happen if we didn't get into the living room—where I was almost positive the Dorklock would be playing video games—in just under five seconds. "What are your favorite?"

"Peanut butter with a Hershey's Kiss center, but I'm an equal-opportunity cookie consumer," he said, grinning.

I opened the door and let him into the house without a second to spare. The Dorklock was indeed busy with his

video games. For about five more seconds I held my breath, wondering if Mom had accounted for the presence of a little brother who didn't give a toad croak what his big sister was doing. Happily, she had forgotten that little loophole, because, other than the bing-buzz-bang of the video game, there was only the sound of an old house creaking and settling.

"Peanut butter with a Hershey's Kiss center? Wow. It's your lucky day." I led Angelo back toward the kitchen. Leaving Tobias behind meant starting another countdown, but I had proved I could handle it without giving Angelo a clue there was magic happening under his nose.

"You have my favorite cookies?" he asked, surprised.

"We do." Well, technically, we would by the time I opened the cookie tin. Little did he know he was going to get exactly the cookies he wanted just because he asked. For one second, I totally got why my mom had liked dating a mortal guy. Marrying him? That, not so much. But I long ago gave up trying to understand why my highly mismatched parents had stayed married way longer than most of my friends' 100 percent certified mortal parents.

We were halfway through the house with time to spare when the Dorklock popped in and asked, "What are you doing?"

Angelo turned and blinked, as if he wondered if his eyes were playing tricks on him.

I said, quickly so as to pass right by the whole appearing-

from-nowhere thing, "I'm getting Angelo some cookies. He's been taking care of the yard work that you usually do, twerp."

Tobias had paled a little when he saw Angelo. I guess he really didn't know what was going on around him when he was playing one of those idiotic games. Apparently, though, he actually had the sense not to pop away or do anything else magical now that he saw Angelo was in the house. "I want some cookies too."

"Fine." It was fine to have the Dorklock around too, I realized. As long as Tobias was with us, Angelo could stay in the kitchen with me forever.

We went into the kitchen and I poured out milk the mortal way for the three of us. Then I opened the tin I had just filled with Angelo's favorite peanut butter cookies.

I let Angelo have first choice. He took two and said, "These look great. Did you make them yourself?"

"I did." Which, technically, wasn't a lie. I *had* made them. There was no need to tell him *how*.

Dorklock, as usual, couldn't just sit there and shove cookies into his mouth while Angelo and I talked and pretended he wasn't there. "I'd rather have chocolate chip."

I wiggled my eyebrows at him to remind him that we had a mortal in the house. "Well, peanut butter is what I have."

He shrugged. "Okay." He started to summon a plate, but I quickly walked over and grabbed one out of the cabinet before Angelo could see.

I handed him the plate with my best big-sister scowl. He hurriedly scooped half a dozen cookies onto his plate, then turned to Angelo. "Want to play a video game?"

"Tobias—" He was always trying to get someone to play his games with him. But to poach Angelo? I couldn't believe he thought I'd let him.

Angelo held up his hand to stop me from scolding Tobias. "I have to finish the yard now. Maybe some other time." He turned his head to smile at me—a smile that, besides making me feel like the only girl on the planet, also said he knew what a pain little brothers could be.

"Okay." Dorklock shrugged again and then popped out of the kitchen without a second thought. Fortunately, Angelo had been looking at me, so he didn't see him disappear. Although when he looked back and noticed Tobias was gone, he said, "He moves fast."

"Don't all thirteen-year-old boys?" I started my count-down again, annoyed at my brother for so many reasons, I couldn't even begin to list them.

"Maybe. But if he's that fast, he should probably go out for the track team when he hits high school."

Right. Track team. Sure. "Good idea."

Just then, Mom came down the back kitchen stairs carrying a box that looked like she'd unearthed it from the attic after years of neglect. I suspected that was true, because our resident housekeeping ghost was walking

beside her, her hands fluttering beside her as if she wished she could help carry it.

Going into polite young man mode, Angelo put down his glass of milk and sprinted over to Mom. "Here, Mrs. S. Let me get that for you."

Mom smiled and relinquished the box to him, which gave me an eyeful of rippling muscle. Apparently the box was heavy.

"Thank you, Angelo," Mom said. "You can put that down in the dining room, if you don't mind."

"Sure thing. I have to get back to the yard work, anyway."

"I saw you working—you've done a great job. I can see why your mother is so proud of you."

"Thank you, Mrs. S." Angelo deposited the box on the dining room table, where Mom pointed. "Pru was just letting me have some of her delicious peanut butter cookies. She's a great cook."

"Ah. Of course." Mom gave me a look and then opened the drawer that Dad put money into for things like the newspaper boy and the odd fund-raising effort that came by. She took out a twenty and handed it to Angelo. "Thank you again for your work. And please tell your mother that we enjoyed her casserole very much. Did she get the dish I left by your door?"

"Yes." Angelo looked toward the front door, obviously eager to get back to work and avoid the undercurrent of tension he no doubt felt from my mother.

I could tell she wanted to tell him we didn't need him working in our yard. But she didn't. Just like she didn't yell at me for bringing a mortal into the house without warning. Not in front of the mortals. I was very glad she hadn't seen Tobias doing his popping thing while Angelo was in the room.

We headed back out, past the Dorklock playing his dorky video games. It was the one mortal thing he hadn't given up in favor of magic.

Angelo looked puzzled. "I thought you only had peanut butter cookies."

"What?" And then I noticed the big plate of chocolate chip cookies sitting next to my clueless little brother. Great. "Mom must have made some without telling me," I improvised. "Would you like a few?"

He stared at me with a "something isn't quite right here" frown for a second, then said, "No thanks. The peanut butter ones you made were perfect."

"Thanks."

As he started down the steps back to work, he stopped and turned to say, "I hope you find a reason to like Salem, Pru."

Oh, yeah. I'd found a reason. Too bad he was mortal and on the new-and-improved "Do Not Date" list along with losers, gang members, Crips, Bloods, and skinheads.

As soon as the door closed, I found myself back in the kitchen—Mom's magic, not mine. Tobias was there too. Mom looked at us both with that "How did I ever think I

could leave you alone?" look. "We need to talk about letting mortals in the house."

"I didn't do anything." Tobias squirmed. I guess he was trying to pop out and Mom was blocking it. Which would have been kewl to watch if I hadn't known my turn to burn was coming next.

"How about popping in and out of the room while Angelo was here?" I wasn't going down alone on this one. After all, I'd been careful of the rules and hadn't done any visible magic.

"I'm not the one who invited him in!" the Dorklock protested.

"Hush." Mom stood up and circled the kitchen like a nervous lioness. "We should have a signal. Something to tell us all that there's a mortal in the house."

"I know," Tobias offered. "We could have one of those air horn blasts. He waved his hand and demonstrated. Mom and I covered our ears.

Mom shook her head. "Hardly. I don't want you going deaf."

Just then, Dad came in. He gave Mom a kiss and dropped his briefcase on the kitchen counter. He was smiling, but as soon as he realized he'd stepped into a problem, his smile faded away. "What's the matter?"

Dorklock, the ever-sensitive, blurted, "We're trying to decide what the warning sign should be for when there's a mortal in the house."

Dad's smile came back—the fake, advertising-hotshot smile. “Why do you need a warning sign?”

Mom sighed and stopped pacing. “Pru invited Angelo in for cookies to thank him for raking the yard.”

“Oh.” He shrugged. “Simple enough.” He turned to me. “Pru, don't invite Angelo into the house again.”

“Daaad! How rude do I have to be?” It was one thing to put Angelo off-limits as boyfriend material. But I didn't want him to think I was stuck-up. What if I got the hang of this witch thing and I could go out with a mortal boy . . . in the future? Waaay in the future?

Mom shook her head. “I wish it were that simple. But Pru is right, we can't appear to be unfriendly. We learned that lesson in Beverly Hills. The neighbors watch unfriendly people even more closely than friendly ones. And Angelo's mother is not one to be frozen out—even politely.”

“Then why don't you whip up a mortal warning charm?” Dad said.

“That's what we were just talking about,” Tobias said. “Make one that sounds like an air horn.”

“Wind chimes,” I said.

“Okay.” Mom didn't look any less worried.

“Great.” Dad kissed her again. “Problem solved.” He grabbed his briefcase and headed for his office.

Tobias popped away, probably back to his video game. Which left me with Mom. Who still looked very problem-

not-solved. I asked, "Do you want me to look for a mortal warning charm in the spell book?"

She shook her head. "There are plenty of them, Pru. But I'll have to think up a special one. I hope I can."

"Why?"

She smiled at me, sadly, like she did when the subject of witch-mortal age differences comes up. "Because I have to find one that will react to all mortals except your father, or we'll be hearing wind chimes every time he's in his own house."

"Oh." I shrugged. "At least it will be wind chimes, not an air horn."

Mom laughed a little. "True." She stopped laughing and made an "I mean it" face. "Angelo is mortal, Pru. You don't need—"

Frappiola, I hadn't seen the lecture coming and I wasn't prepared to listen. "Don't worry. He just looked thirsty."

"Right." Sometimes I forget that Mom was young once too. But she reminded me when she said cheerfully, "If I were a few centuries younger, and not married, I don't know if I could resist that one."

"Mom!" Ewww.

She looked at me, one final mom-warning moment. "He's mortal, Pru, and that makes him dangerous right now. Plus, there's something about him. . . ." Her voice trailed off. I stared at her, waiting for her to elaborate. "Oh, I don't know. But don't make him cookies anymore, okay?"

“No problemo, *Mamacita*,” I lied. “I wouldn’t have time for him, anyway, what with all the studying I have to do for school and getting the team ready for competition.”

For some reason, Mom didn’t call me out on my blatant lie. We both knew there was always time for a guy like Angelo.

I can’t say I wasn’t bummed that he was a “look, don’t touch” kind of neighbor. Six-pack abs are pretty sexy. And that’s one thing you don’t see a lot of in witch world. Witches pop, they don’t pump. But Agatha was watching.



Chapter 8



Speaking of the Do Not Date list, and boys as friends in general, there was one boy I needed to keep on my good side. Samuel. Besides the fact that he was smart, he had one of the best Earth Talents in school—not to mention that my parents liked him, which was more positive than negative, in his case. And I was pretty sure I was lucky that he'd stayed my friend when I made the transition from new girl with no seat in the lunchroom to cheerleader with a place at the kewlest table in school.

Don't get me wrong. Samuel is not a snob. Not even a reverse snob who hates on kawl kids. No, he's a fringie. Fringies tend to get along with everyone, because that's the fringie nature. They just don't get the differences that

everyone else sees. They're like people who can not only walk through walls but can't even see the walls. But being friendly isn't the same thing as being a friend—as anyone raised in Beverly Hills knows beyond any possible doubt.

So far, Samuel had stayed more friend than friendly. There'd been some changes in our relationship since I made the cheerleading squad, but I didn't want the fundamental fact that we were friends to get lost in the drama of the unfortunately necessary reality that I wasn't eating lunch with Samuel—and my other fringie friends, Maria and Denise—since I'd made the cheerleading squad. I missed them a little. Not enough to eat with them, but enough to stop by and say hello. Nevermind that Tara and the girls on the squad were watching me for warning signs of impending social suicide.

In typical fringie fashion, the three people who had been willing to let me sit at their table that first week when I was the dreaded “new girl” were welcoming enough, although I could tell they understood the unspoken rules—no sitting down, no Hollywood kiss-kiss-lovelytoseeyou, just hey-howareya-moveon. At least, Maria and Denise did. Samuel was clueless, as always.

“You can have lunch with us, Pru, the cheerleaders' table won't collapse without you just this one time.”

A bowl of Samuel's trademark curry appeared on the table. “Pull up a chair, stranger.” He smiled, and I felt awk-

ward. I could see that Maria and Denise did too. They were all three authentic fringies, but Maria and Denise, being girls, got that I wasn't comfortable floating between undefined groups like they were. I wanted to be a kewl kid. I needed to be a kewl kid.

Samuel? He just thought he could eventually convince me I didn't need to be kewl. As if.

"Sorry to hear Agatha didn't let you take the test-out option early," Maria said as she popped away the curry dish that Samuel had pointedly left on the table in front of me.

"Yeah, bummer." Denise shook her head. "You'd think she'd be impressed that you were working so hard."

"I'm not giving up completely," I assured them. "But"—I couldn't help an involuntary glance over at the cheerleaders' table—"my time is getting way scarce these days, what with practice and games and all. Coach wants me to show the team everything I know about competitive cheering."

"That's great, Pru!" Maria laughed. "I remember the first pep rally, when you said you wanted to join the team. And now you're going to transform it."

Denise frowned. "Tara down with that, is she?"

"Nothing I can't handle," I lied.

Samuel hadn't said much after I refused his curry. But now he must have decided to forgive me, because he popped something on the table in front of me. It looked like a thick green jade bracelet. But knowing Samuel, I knew

it wasn't just a piece of jewelry. I mean, the glasses he wears aren't just freaky-looking tri-lenses of different colors—they also let him see into different dimensions.

“So what does this do?” I didn't pick up the bracelet right away. I confess, I was a little worried. Samuel is my best friend in Salem, but he's also the geekiest geek I ever met. Not to mention an excellent witch who'd manifested an Earth Talent that gave him an insight into the workings of the physical world that could be scary to a unTalented halfling like me.

“It will warn you when someone is lying to you.” He glanced over at the cheerleaders' table. “You need it if you want to eat lunch with them every day.”

True. But did I want to admit it in front of these three? I picked up the bracelet. “How does it work?”

“Put it on.” Samuel smiled, almost as if he was enjoying the fact that I was nervous about his gift. Dork.

I put it on. It felt lighter than it looked. The stone was smooth and curved and cool against my wrist.

Samuel sat back and flipped his glasses a bit as he focused on me. “Okay. Denise, tell her a lie.”

Denise shook her head and crossed her arms. “You tell her a lie.”

Samuel scowled at Denise for a second, but then he shrugged. He turned to Maria. “Maria?”

Maria looked at me and sighed. She said, a little more

loudly than she usually spoke, "Pru, you have the ugliest hair I've ever seen."

Whoa. "That was harsh."

"I'm sorry. Your hair is really beautiful. I was lying to you." She looked like she might cry. "Samuel told me to lie and I thought you understood—"

I took pity on her. "I understood. We're all part of this big, mysterious experiment of Samuel's." I looked at him. "So? What were you trying to do besides make Maria miserable and get me to put on a hoodie for life?"

He flipped his glasses a little more. "Didn't you feel the bracelet react to Maria's lie?"

Well. No. "I didn't notice anything. I was too busy wondering what was wrong with my hair."

"Nothing's wrong with your hair," Maria said again, just in case I hadn't believed her the first time. "I love that straight, blond look on you. It's so . . . Pru."

It was Samuel's turn to sigh. "Girls."

Denise snorted in amusement. "What did you expect, Samuel? You gave her a bracelet and you asked Maria to lie to her."

"I asked you first."

"Fine." Denise looked at me. "I want to sit at the cheerleaders' table with you."

This time I was prepared, so even though Denise's lie surprised me, I noticed right away that the bracelet made my

arm tingle and the cool stone got very warm, very fast.

“Neat.” I smiled at Samuel, wishing for a minute that I did think of him as more than a friend. It would make life a whole lot easier. Not that Tara and the rest of the cheerleaders would accept a geek in their midst. But maybe I could have cleaned him up a little. He was really cute when he took his glasses off, and a kewlicious-style makeover would go a long way with him.

“Like it?” He smiled at me, a smile that was so genuine and geekily innocent that I knew there was no way I’d ever clean him up just to feed him to a bunch of cheerleaders.

“Love it. Thank you.” Maybe he and Maria would make a cute couple if I could get them to notice each other that way? I’d have to think about it.

“No problem.” As I turned away to head toward the cheerleaders’ table, he added, “If you’re going to be kewl, you need something to help you watch your back.”

Fringie friends. They should come with an operating manual.

Not that kewl friends were much better. I knew I should have stuck with my drive-by-hi plan. Then Samuel could have given me the bracelet at our tutoring session with no one to notice but my family. Instead, as soon as I sat down at the cheerleaders’ lunch table, Tara said, “Why were you talking to *them*?” She looked at the bracelet, but didn’t say anything.

I shrugged. If she wasn’t going to ask about the bracelet,

I wasn't going to explain. "I always talk to people I like." I said it very casually, though. I didn't want to get into a challenge-fest about people I chose to talk to, but I didn't want to get cold-shouldered by the team because I wasn't playing by the kewl kid rules either. I would have liked witch high school better if it didn't have exactly the same social rules as mortal high school. There are so many "us versus them" groups to sort out, it gives a new girl a migraine.

Tara didn't look happy. I think she was trying to figure out a way to ask about the bracelet without looking like she was asking, but one of the other cheerleaders saved her from having to finesse the info out of me.

"What did he give you?" Yvette was across the table from me, but she reached over and touched the bracelet in curiosity when I blocked her attempt to summon it from my wrist. I would have spent a second congratulating myself on a successful blocking spell, but I was too distracted wondering how to explain the bracelet. The truth was not an option, of course.

"It's just a bracelet." A bracelet that stung me for telling that lie. Ouch.

"He likes you? Yuck." Thanks to Samuel's skill at bending school rules, Tara had gone for a ride in my car during school hours, but she hadn't softened her attitude toward my friendship with him. She wanted me to act like he didn't exist.

“Geeks can be useful. Remember?” I tried to remind her how Samuel could be useful without revealing any specifics in front of the rest of the squad.

“I suppose.” She dropped the subject of Samuel and bent over to examine the bracelet. “That is really hideous. I can’t believe you agreed to wear it. Do you *like him* like him?”

“No, I don’t *like him* like him.” I said it quickly and I meant it, but it didn’t escape my notice that the bracelet tingled at Tara’s lie about finding it hideous. “But I do like the bracelet he made for me.”

I shouldn’t have rubbed in the fact that Tara liked it too. But her superior attitude about Samuel really irritated me.

“Really?” I could see the smackdown coming. From the way the other girls at the table held their breath, I’m sure they did too. “I think it’s hideous. You couldn’t *make* me wear it. Sometimes I wonder if you really belong on the team, Pru. First you give us those four stupid rules. And now you’re actually going to wear *that*.”

The burn was way worse than I expected. She might have been more understanding if I’d explained how much extra help I needed if I ever wanted to get out of remedial classes. Maybe. But I was keeping that truth to myself. There was as much chance she’d understand that fact as there was that she’d use it to make sure no one ever talked to me again.

I was already in danger of that happening as I considered what to say. “Liar liar, pants on fire” would have been accu-

rate, according to my bracelet. But we weren't in third grade. And she was the captain of the cheerleading squad.

Fortunately, Isabella joined the table with a great-gossip grin. "Guess what I just heard from Achilles?"

Everyone at our table—and a few who weren't—turned to her to hear the news. Achilles was our star basketball player, and Isabella had been flirting with him in the hopes he would ask her to the fall formal.

I tuned down the gossip, just glad that I—and my ugly (*not*), bracelet—was no longer under the kewlscope. It was tiring to be the focus of attention here at Agatha's. The risk of a deep fall to the lowest scud status possible couldn't be pep-rallied away until I could handle magic with at least the skill of a ten-year-old.

As I sat watching them shred the rep of the basketball player's girlfriend (she was a cheerleader, too, but from another school, so it was allowed), it occurred to me that my mom's too little, too late idea for a sweet sixteen birthday party, all risks of permanent humiliation aside, just might be the only way for me to get the girls—and Tara—back to thinking of me as an asset to the team, rather than an enormous blemish on the face of the Witches.



Chapter 9



Right after practice was over—yet another torture session where Coach had me explain, again, about precision movement being important in competitive cheering—I popped back home, determined to tell Mom I wanted a sweet sixteen party after all.

To be exact, I wanted the best sweet sixteen anyone at Agatha's had ever seen. I didn't have a clue how to make that happen. I just knew that was what I wanted more than anything right now. I'd taken my bracelet off for practice—by unclasping it the mortal way, which I don't think anyone noticed—but that didn't stop Tara and the others from looking at me with suspicion.

The risks of my slipping up and revealing myself as a scud

were high. So the more wowapalooza the party, the greater the chance that no one would notice my lack of magical skills.

Mom was in the kitchen, sipping a cup of tea and reading a book. She looked up and smiled when I came in, and then popped up a plate of crackers, cheese, and grapes for me. "How did school and practice go?"

I pop-swapped the cheese and crackers for carrots and the grapes for apple slices. "Train wreck." I wanted to soften her up so she wouldn't do the motherhood gloat thing when she found out I'd finally seen she was right about the party. Not that I was lying about my day.

She popped a low-fat oatmeal-raisin cookie next to my apple slices. "I'm sorry. Can I do anything to help?"

I picked a raisin out of the cookie and ate it, trying not to sound as desperate as I felt. "Tell me how to throw a sweet sixteen party that will wow even the kewlest of the kewl high school witches."

I guess my intensity was dialed up a notch too high, because she looked astonished. She drew breath to speak and then stopped three times before she finally said, "That's a tall order, Pru."

Great. She was already making sure this party idea would fail. Big-time. "You said you'd give me a party to help me get to know the other kids at Agatha's." And to impress them, which was way more important. Not that I'd say so to Mom. She didn't approve of trying to impress people deliberately.

"A party, yes." She nodded and popped herself an oatmeal-raisin cookie just like the one she'd given me. "But you don't need the biggest party in the school."

"I do. I want to invite a lot of people. And I want them to have fun. Sweet sixteen parties are supposed to be grand."

"Grand?" She bit into her cookie as if to give herself an excuse to think while she chewed and swallowed. "We're not in Beverly Hills anymore. Salem is—"

"Living in Salem is like living on the moon, Mom. If I want any chance to stay on the kewl kid list, I've got to have the best party. Even better than the one I wanted in Beverly Hills."

She turned a little pale. I knew she'd thought what I wanted then was way over the top. And I hadn't even asked for the biggest things other kids in my school had gotten—like sculpted ice slides and mini-three ring circuses.

Not that I thought anything that would have been kewl back in the mortal realm would do for the witches. "Don't worry. I'm not going to ask for anything I wanted at the old party at this new party. I have a feeling that some famous band or a chocolate waterfall just isn't going to cut it for the kids at Agatha's."

"I don't see the need for a famous band—I didn't before, and I certainly don't now." Mom wasn't against music, I knew that. She was against excessive show. "Any teenager who wants to go to a band concert can go on their own."

"Right. Pop in. Pop out. No tickets, no metal detectors."

I agreed with her to soften her up. I needed this party to be spectacular. Without Mom's permission—and help—that just wasn't going to happen. "Besides, I don't even know what kind of music or bands are popular." Some of the music I overheard in the hallway I recognized. Most of it I'd never heard before I'd set foot in Agatha's.

Mom was still trying to wiggle away from a big wow-fest of a party. "We have the pool and the bowling lane. Won't that be special?"

"I want a sleepover, too." I headed off the no boys overnight lecture I could see coming. "Just for the girls on the squad. We need some heavy-duty bonding time."

"O-kay." Fortunately, Mom wasn't against the idea of sixteen girls sleeping—or not—in her house for my party. Score one for me. "I guess I could see how that would be fun. You used to enjoy sleepovers so much in Beverly Hills."

"Those were mortal sleepovers, Mom." How do you explain kewl to someone who hasn't clued in to the concept in over three hundred years? A woman who once wore Earth shoes into Barneys? "Remember? I'm not supposed to do things the mortal way until I get up to speed on my magic?"

"Oh, Pru . . . sixteen-year-old mortals? Sixteen-year-old witches? How different can a sleepover be?" She sounded amused.

Amused! Clearly she still didn't fully understand what I was asking for. "Mom. I know how to throw a sleepover in

the mortal realm. But what should I do to make it magically spectacular? You know, instead of the Cinderella ball with the coach-and-four and the castle and the prince that Adriana's big sister had last year? Should I turn mice into footmen for real?"

Mom bit her lip and looked at me. She. So. Did. Not. Get. It. "Music. Dancing. Games. All of those things cross the mortal-witch divide. Honey, I think you're worrying too much. Witches are just as pleased as mortals are when they're invited to a well-thrown party."

I noticed the bracelet on my wrist was tingling. Great. My mom was lying to me. "So could I set this up for weekend after next?"

"Weekend after next?" Mom hesitated. "Are you sure you want to do it so soon?"

Ummm. Yes. What good is it to have a party after it has been confirmed that I don't deserve kewl status? "I'd like to bond with my team sooner rather than later, Mom. Regionals are coming up fast, and we're nowhere near ready."

"Fine. Then weekend after next it is." Mom smiled. "It's going to be great, honey. You'll feel like a part of Agatha's after this, I'm sure."

My bracelet tingled again. I know that sometimes moms lie when they give you the standard pep talk. But it doesn't feel good to have my bracelet confirm she was telling the whopper to end all whoppers.

If I could have, I would have taken the bracelet off just so I wouldn't know what she really thought. I'd thought detecting lies would make life easier, but it was a real confidence-buster. Why was she lying to me, anyway? Didn't she think I could handle the truth?

Before I could find a way to ask her without letting her know about the bracelet, Dad walked into the kitchen, whistling. He had a bunch of pink roses in one hand and his briefcase in the other. He kissed Mom on the cheek, but didn't give her the roses. Instead, he handed them to me and said, "Pink roses to cheer up my best girl."

"Thanks, Dad." I didn't know what else to say. I mean, if I wanted pink roses, I could summon them. He knew that, on some level. But I guess there wasn't really any other way for him to act but mortal, since he was one. Unlike me. I popped the flowers into a vase and tried not to notice how his smile froze a little.

Mom gave Dad a hug and smiled at me. "See? Everything is going to work out. Flowers today, a sweet sixteen party in two weeks. Why, I wouldn't be surprised if you manifest your Talent before Christmas."

"You decided to have the party after all?" Dad asked.

"I didn't want to get a reputation for being a non-party girl," I joked. Better to keep it light with Dad. He didn't like his little girl being the unhappy new kid on the block, but he wasn't exactly the go-to guy for advice on how

to magic up a party and leave the mortal realm behind.

"I'm proud of you for being so grown up, honey." Dad kissed me on the forehead and headed upstairs to his office.

I looked at Mom. "He's going to freak when he finds out I'm planning a magic party."

She didn't help my already shredded confidence any when she didn't argue with me. Instead, she just said, "I think I'll suggest he take a golfing weekend. He loves to do that. A house full of witches is probably a little more than he can handle right now."

"Good. That way I don't have to worry about him getting mad at me." Or going really quiet and retreating to the little study/office/library Mom had whipped up for him in the attic. He was spending an awful lot of time there while his children practiced magic in every other room of the house.

But what did it mean that the party that would make me or break me as a kewl kid drove my dad, the uptight mortal, out of the house? I had always taken it for granted that my parents were the weird happy kind of parents who might argue but would never split up. Until we got to Salem.

If I felt like I was running behind and was never going to catch up, what must Dad feel like? He was a mortal among witches. We didn't have to hide our magic from him, which was good for us. And I know he wanted us to do well, even in our magic classes. Even if we went places and did things that he would never be able to do.

Oh well. I refused to worry. I'd just have to call on Team Pru to get the best ever sweet sixteen party ever planned. For witches. Samuel would have some kewl ideas, I bet. And I could tell him like it was and why it was so important. For the cheerleaders, I'd have to be careful not to let them know I didn't have any idea at all what would be kewl for a witch party. I'd just have to find a way to pick their brains without clueing them in to how clueless I was.



Chapter 10



Witches rock!

Witches roll!

Watch that clock!

Meet your goal!

Tara clapped her hands together and called out, “Okay! Enough chatter. Time to work. I need the flyers with me. Dirt shufflers go with Pru.”

Cute. The “dirt shufflers”—a name Tara had made up to refer to the floor exercises Coach had authorized me to teach in preparation for the regional competition—came toward me enthusiastically enough.

Yvette, a tiny flyer who had decided she wanted to follow

my four rules—most of the time—asked, “What will you teach us today, Pru? Can we do one of those pyramid things?”

Being asked a question by someone who cared about the answer almost makes me feel like a full member of the squad. Almost.

“No pyramid today, Yvette. We’re going to keep our feet on the ground until we get our form as sharp as a diamond chip.” Which should have been fun, because I can do perfect form with my eyes closed . . . or I could back in my old school in Beverly Hills. Here, if I kept my eyes closed, I might end up with a broken leg, or an arm slapping into my face.

The girls lined up for me, a little haphazardly, but good enough for cheering at mortal games. That was one of the problems I’d discovered during my first few weeks on the team. The girls had two cheer modes: At a mortal game, they wanted to encourage the team, get the crowd making noise, and move around enough to keep warm on the fall football field; at a witch game, they wanted to do all that, plus dazzle the crowd with the special effects they could do with magic. In other words, they were big on razzle-dazzle, but not so much on coordinating movements with each other in the way a competition team needs to.

Of course, as “dirt shuffler” captain, I needed to turn these wobbly witches into precision movers so tight that they could do dance backup for Britney. In other words, I

couldn't complain about the lack of coordination unless I planned to fix it. No problem. With my feet on the ground, I was a better cheerleader than most. The first thing to work on, as always, was attitude.

You'd think witches would have no problem with attitude. And they didn't, really. If you wanted attitude that put the individual above the team. Problem is, in a cheerleading competition, you didn't. We have to act like a unit. Not so easy when someone is feeling crampy and someone else just stole a squad member's boyfriend. Which is why you need to work on the teamwork concept right from the beginning. Because cramps could be handled with the same mind-over-pain attitude that a cheerleader needs to do the perfect triple backflip, and boys . . . well, there was always a new boy, and if the jerk was fool enough to go out with one of your fellow cheerleaders and think you wouldn't catch on, he was definitely on the throwback list.

So. Attitude. I faced the girls and clapped sharply three times. "What does a cheerleader do?"

That one threw them. They reacted as if I were a teacher who had tossed a trick question at them. Silence.

So I tried a page from the teacher book of lame ways to encourage student participation. "Quick. First person to tell me what a cheerleader does gets a gold star."

Yvette, surprisingly one of the braver girls today, was the first to answer. "Duh. Cheer?"

Since I was in cheer-teacher mode, I jumped up and punched my fist in the air. "Yes! Cheer. Go cheerleaders." I floated a gold star toward the rather astonished winner. "We support the team, we keep them going when things get tough, and we keep them on their toes when they're doing well so they won't let the momentum die."

"Isn't that what I said?" Yvette had turned the gold star into a tiara and was wearing it, much to the amusement of the other three girls in my "dirt shuffler" group.

"So cheerleaders raise spirits, right?" I asked the question in a "stay with me, people" kind of way. I wanted their attention focused on me, not on how much fun Tara's group was having as they crawled on the ceiling like miniature spider-women.

They nodded. But I wasn't sure they were staying with me. Or if they had even stopped wanting to. Normally, I wouldn't have let a little slip in enthusiasm throw me off my leadership game. But that was before I'd had to face Agatha and the direct possibility that I was destined to be a Talentless drab of a witch forever.

So I think I could be forgiven for the doubts that crowded in as I stood in front of the girls, trying to convince them to become real cheerleaders instead of just doing what they saw cheerleaders doing on TV. And doing it badly, too.

I pointed to Jakeera. "Whose spirits do we raise?"

She looked uncertain. "The football team?"

I nodded and pumped a fist in the air to get the blood going. Not that it seemed to be working, but still, the tide could turn any second and I could have four enthusiastic students on my hands. "Who else?" I pointed to the next girl.

Celestina took advantage of the previous right answer to go for something equally obvious. "The basketball team?"

"Great!" Another fist pump, even higher than before since it seemed I'd be responsible for all enthusiasm in this practice session. "Who else?" I pointed again.

"The crowd, of course," Elektra answered with a bored drawl, as though I were making her repeat the days of the week.

"Excellent! But there is someone even more important than all the teams or the crowds. Anyone want to guess?"

No one did.

So I answered myself, with a purely pretend peppiness. "The cheerleaders, of course! How can we raise the spirits of the team and the crowd if we don't do it for ourselves?"

Silence.

I piled on more infomercial peppiness. "We can't, can we?"

Apparently, I'd really lost Yvette. She was lost enough to show it publicly by asking me point-blank: "What do you mean?"

"We are a team, not out for our own individual glory, but to make the team shine, right?"

They nodded, tentatively. But I'm not sure if it was

because they agreed with me or because they saw Coach Gertie heading our way to check out how our session was going.

I continued, refusing to allow their dulled attention to blunt the sharpness of my delivery. "We cheer ourselves on by doing our moves as perfectly as we possibly can. And we cheer on one another when we spur other cheerleaders on the team to do their best, no matter how unteamlike one person may feel at that moment."

There were a few nods, and I dared to hope I'd sparked some beginning of understanding about the true meaning of teamwork.

Unfortunately, Tara's group had been flying close and listening in. They let out a burst of protests that derailed my lesson in pepitude quicker than a bucket of ice chills a bottle of champagne. "But she can't keep in step." And, "How many elephants does it take to break a cheerleader's nose?" (referring to our last witch game and a rather large and enthusiastic witch cheering for the opposing school who got too close, too fast) and, my personal favorite: "It's just too hard to stay on the ground and do this stuff!"

I looked to Tara, hoping she'd offer some support. We had cemented a very tentative alliance not that long ago when we ditched school and drove around for the afternoon in my brand-new Jetta—a gift from my grandmother as consolation for being the most backward witch in the school.

Not that I had much time to cruise when I had to study 24/7.

But she didn't really like that Coach was letting me show anybody anything. The gleam in her eyes told me how happy she was that no one was rushing to take up the Pru Pepitude challenge. Sigh. Nothing was easy in witchworld. Not even getting the head cheerleader to see why the whole squad should be in sync and ready to get each other's back during practice and games—no matter how they felt off the floor.

I had to say something. So I did. "It may be hard, but mortals do it all the time—and they can't even cast a don't hit the floor spell like we can. Imagine what we could do if we only tried?"

Tara narrowed her eyes, not a good sign. Then she said, "We're not your old team, Pru. We're not mortals. We're not dirt shufflers. We're witches. We're flyers."

"No. We're not just witches, not when it comes to competition," I answered her back, much to her annoyance. "We're *the Witches*. There's a difference."

"What? A capital W?" Tara was really feeling threatened by me today. I couldn't quite figure out why, because the only one smiling at me was Coach Gertie.

"No. Team Spirit with a capital S. You can be a little sloppy cheering at a game as long as you keep the crowd stoked. But in competition?" I wasn't going to let her get

me down. Or so I chanted repeatedly inside my mind. "When we're on the floor, we need to move like we have one mind; one body, and one spirit!"

"Like your old team of mortal dirt shufflers?" she challenged me.

"Yes. Like my old team." I was really beginning to hate the nickname "dirt shufflers." "Of championship cheerleaders."

Elektra wanted to share some of Tara's snark. "What makes them so special?"

"Besides the fact that they've won the national championship three years running?" I asked the question innocently enough, although I'd seen Coach Gertie listening closely to our exchange. "If you spent a day with them, you'd know why 'dirt shuffling' is important."

"Excellent suggestion, Prudence!" Coach Gertie came into our midst with a beaming smile and not a clue that no one—including me—knew what suggestion she'd thought I'd just made.

But we found out fast enough when she turned to the girls staring at her dumbly and asked, "Should we take a field trip?"

It took me a few seconds to get up to speed, but I was still faster than the other girls. Coach Gertie wanted us to take a trip to Beverly Hills to observe the winning team in action.

Now, I'd already learned what a history field trip back to the sixteenth century involved, so I didn't immediately

jump to say yes. But Tara did. "Sure, why don't we go see Pru's old team?"

"I'm glad you agree." Coach Gertie popped a datebook into her hand and jotted something down in it. "Next practice we'll take a little trip to see what a championship team can show us about winning a competition."

Oh, goody. While I thought the girls could learn a lot from such a field trip, it meant nothing but heartache for me. Not only would I have to see the team I had planned to lead as head cheerleader this year, I'd also have to see Maddie, my ex-best friend and big-time lying almost-boyfriend stealer. I couldn't wait.



Chapter 11



Between Agatha's remarks about my magical abilities (or lack thereof), Mom lying to me, and my team calling my skills "dirt shuffling," I was feeling about as low as a former TV star doing a guest shot on someone else's show. So when Samuel came over for our regular tutoring session, I resorted to digging for reassurance. I needed it bad.

"Do you think I could pass the test now if Skin and Bones (the nickname I'd adopted for Mr. Phogg, my remedial summoning and spells teacher)—and Agatha, of course—would let me take it?"

He thought about it a little while, flipping the colored lenses of his glasses up and down until I wondered if I should dial up the quest for reassurance a notch so he'd get it.

Finally, he said, “You’re getting really good at flying.”

“Cheering practice helps there.” Even though I was leading the “dirt shuffling” work, I still had at least half of practice to work on my own flying, tumbling, and stunt skills.

“And the games, too.” He nodded. I remembered that he had been coming to all the games, except the ones that conflicted with his chess team matches. “And your spells are . . . interesting, but they do the job.”

“Thanks.” I couldn’t think of more underwhelming praise. But I forgave him, because he was Samuel—a geek to the nth degree who thought being brutally honest was a good thing. Which it was, but cheerleaders know how to do it with a little more kindness—when they want to be kind, of course.

“You can summon more than one object now. Are you up to ten at a time?”

Eight. But who was counting? The other good thing about cheerleaders is that we know to stop when the whole honesty thing starts to hurt.

Not so Samuel. “Your potion work, though . . . we’ve hardly worked on any of it. Has your mom’s cousin tutored you in that?”

“A little.” I shrugged. “He had to go somewhere for a little while, but we’ll dedicate time to potions when he gets back.” Which could be ten years from now, according to Mom. Cousin Seamus was brilliant, but apparently shared

the family mad streak that Agatha had complained to my mother about.

Samuel had finally caught on to the fact that I needed a few warm fuzzies. He said sympathetically, "Well, maybe we could work on potions tonight."

Great. Another vastly unexplored subject that sounded like a big load of trial and error. With error having consequences running from indigestion to death. Still, it had to be done. "Like what would be a potion I should already know?"

"Ummm." Even brilliant Samuel had to stop and think back to his early school days. "Any potion that heals the common cold, zits, gets rid of excess body hair. You know, the cosmetic stuff your people in Beverly Hills had to pay big bucks to a doctor or a pharmacy to get fixed."

Big whoop. As potions go, I knew at least five over-the-counter and six prescription drugs that would take care of any and all of those problems. Of course, those were mortal inventions, so they were of no use to me now.

I sighed. "Well, let's try the zit potion. A girl can always use one of those."

"Okay." He waited a beat, like I was supposed to do something, and then he asked, "Where's your potions cupboard?"

Our potions cupboard? This wasn't a question I knew how to answer. But I bet I knew who did.

I popped down to the living room, where Mom was playing Tobias's video game with him—and losing badly because she simply could not get the hang of a six-button controller. Not that I had any sympathy at all for her. She'd had the Dorklock, after all. It was up to her to raise him. "Mom. Where is our potions cupboard?"

Mom looked up guiltily. "Potions cupboard? For your lessons?"

I nodded.

Tobias crowed as he took advantage of her inattention to kill her off on the video game.

"You're dead, Mom. I won." He looked a little glazed over, but happy. As if he'd won world peace. Or knew where the potions cupboard was. Or maybe just knew we had one.

Turns out our potions cupboard is down in the kitchen, right off the butler's pantry. It was very well stocked. I had a feeling that potion shopping was one of the things my mom had gotten used to doing when no one was looking, back when we all lived in the mortal world and weren't supposed to practice magic. But since I wasn't feeling friendly, I didn't ask.

I was not in the mood to hide my crankiness. "Why didn't you tell me about this? Do you want me to fail?"

"Of course not." Mom actually looked shocked that I would think such a thing. She glanced at Samuel before she replied, "I didn't expect—"

So she didn't want to look like a neglectful mother in front of my friend? Tough biscotti. "Mom. This has to stop. You have to tell me what I need to know—what I was supposed to learn from you long ago—or you may as well just send me back to live in the mortal realm."

Samuel didn't say anything in the silence that followed my mini-meltdown. He didn't move, not even to flip his glasses a few times. He did swallow, loudly, which made us all jump.

Mom smiled at him. "I'm sorry we got out of sorts in front of you, Samuel." To me, she said softly, "I think I've become so used to staying under the radar with my magic that I sometimes forget what you don't know. But"—she waved at the potions lined up in the cupboard and pointed to the family spell book, which apparently also sat in the cupboard when one of us hadn't summoned it to study or make an entry—"you know everything now."

"I do?"

"Yes."

Too bad my lie detector bracelet told a different story. I sighed.

Despite my meltdown, Mom let Samuel stay to help me with potions. We didn't even get to the zit potion recipe, though, because I had to learn where each item in the potions cupboard was. And *what* it was, too. By the time we were done, I didn't need Samuel to tell me I wasn't ready

for the test to get me out of remedial magic. Bummer.

But I didn't hold my lack of progress against Samuel. It was my mom's fault, and I was really clear about that. I knew she felt guilty, and that's why I was getting this belated sweet sixteen party. But I wasn't going to let her off the hook that easily.

Samuel, however, deserved a lot of thanks for being a good friend, even if he wasn't very good at sugarcoating bad news.

"Okay. Now I need your help on something fun," I told him.

"Really?" He seemed surprised.

"Really." I was so excited, I could barely contain myself. Back home, I had been planning a sweet sixteen to put all the others to shame. Mom had been nixing every great idea I had, of course, but that's only to be expected—she never got into the whole over-the-top Beverly Hills scene, anyway. But now that she was trying to make up for throwing me into the shark pool of magic education without the right weapons, I had a feeling I could slip some of the fabulously kewl stuff past her without so much as a peep of negativity from her.

So I threw myself on Samuel's rather twisted mercy. "I'm having a birthday party and I need the kewlest invitations you've ever seen."

"Oh. That does sound like fun." He was acting weird, and I couldn't quite read why. All of a sudden I had a tremendous

fear. "Witches do celebrate their birthdays, don't they?"

"Of course we do." He grinned. "We save the big stuff for the decade, and the really big stuff for the centuries, but we celebrate every year with a little something too."

I guess he thought this was good news to me. But he couldn't have been more wrong. "So sixteen isn't anything special?"

Again with the brutal honesty, he answered, "No. Why would it be?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Sixteen's a biggie in the mortal world. For girls, at least. I guess it probably has some sexist reason about girls turning into women or something. But I don't care. I'm going to throw the kewlest sweet sixteen Agatha's has ever seen. If I do a fantastic job, I bet I could even start a hot new trend among the kawl young witches."

"How are you planning to do that?"

"With lots of planning." And a big helping of luck, too, but I didn't need to tell him that. "Which is where you come in."

"I'm not a party planner." He really looked worried, as if he thought I'd make him social director for the Good Ship Pru's sweet sixteen. As if.

"Well, because a kawl party starts with a hot, can't-miss invitation, I need your genius help to design the best invitations the school has ever seen."

He thought about that for a moment, with some flipping

of his lenses, which made *me* want to flip out a little, I was so on edge from the whole potions cupboard revelation and the party planning madness. “So if it burst into flame, that would be good?”

“Uh. No.” Sometimes Samuel’s sense of humor is more miss than hit. But I had to forgive him. He was a boy, after all. I realized I had better talk fast unless I wanted to end up with an invitation only a headless horseman could love. “I know what I want, but I don’t know how to do it.”

“Okay.” He sighed, apparently resigned to having to shelve his more high-geek invitation ideas. “So tell me what you want and I’ll see what I can do about it.”

I could picture it perfectly in my mind, but could I explain it to him? “I want a bubble—clear, but a little bit sparkly pink, too.”

“Bubble, check.” He made a checkmark in the air, and a tiny pink bubble floated free from the bend of the check.

“Bigger than that, of course,” I amended. “And I want it to float at eye level, know who it’s for, and then sing an invitation that only the person it’s meant for can hear when she pops it.”

“Wow.” He looked half stunned and half impressed—which left *me* half stunned and half impressed. I guess I had a little Talent in the invitation design department. “You really meant it when you said you wanted a one-of-a-kind invitation, didn’t you?”

"Of course." His reaction made me pretty sure I was on the right track for a kewler than kawl party.

"Okay." He closed his eyes to think.

"Do you think that will be kewl enough?" I asked anxiously. "Or should it have some fireworks, too? Or maybe a shower of glittery micro-mini bubbles could be released when it pops?"

He opened his eyes and stared at me for a few seconds. "Sometimes simple is better."

Boys. What do they know? "Sure. But not when you're talking about the sweet sixteenth!"

"Okay, okay." He held up his hands in surrender to my ideas. "We can do it. No problem. But we'll need to use some things from your potions cupboard."

"No problem." And really, it wasn't, now that I knew we had a potions cupboard.

It took some figuring—and Samuel did most of the work, I admit. But I learned a lot and got some really kewl invitations out of the tutoring session too.

It was funny. Back in Beverly Hills there was so much competition about who was going to throw the sweet sixteen party of the year. I'd seen invitations made in chocolate, silk, and carefully fanned gold foil. And the parties got wilder from there. But the kewl kids back at Beverly Hills would be sooooo jealous to see my invitations. If they could ever know about this magic stuff. Which they couldn't. Bummer.

We got all the invitations prepared before it was time for Samuel to go home. Just before he left, I popped an invitation bubble I'd made all by myself in front of him. It glowed properly, just like I'd practiced. At least I could handle an invitation spell. For one, anyway.

"What's that?" He looked at it suspiciously, even though he'd already helped me make fifty others. Sometimes I wonder about how smart a geek he actually is if he's always missing the obvious.

"Duh." I wiggled my eyebrows like my mom always did to me when I asked a silly question. "*Your* invitation."

"Thanks." He took the invitation, but he didn't open it in front of me.

"If it says something funny, don't hold it against me, okay? I'm new to this whole magic thing, you know?"

He smiled. "So, when do you turn sixteen?"

"Already turned, actually. In August."

"Oh." He seemed a little surprised by that. "So why are you having the party now?"

"Because I've been dreaming about a sweet sixteen party since I was a very little girl. Not to mention that I had to celebrate my birthday on the road between Beverly Hills and here. Now that I know enough kids from school to invite, Mom's giving me a do-over."

"And you're inviting me first?" He looked pleased, but then he frowned. "What about Maria and Denise?"

"I—" I opened my mouth to make some lame excuse and give it a plausible polish, but he flipped his glasses at me.

"I can't come if they don't. That's what friends do."

I switched gears. "Of course I'm inviting them, silly." I owed it to them, anyway—they'd helped me out those first few scary weeks before I'd made the squad.

"Great."

He was so happy, I didn't mention that I was only planning to give Maria and Denise the guy invitation—the one that didn't include an invite to the sleepover after the bash. That was squad-only. Anyone else would make the bonding moment less prime.



Chapter 12



H! U! S!

T! L! E!

Hustle!

For victory!

Coach Gertie had two whistles around her neck rather than one, which indicated exactly how nervous she was about taking the sixteen of us on a field trip into the mortal realm. “Line up, girls! Straight lines, please.” She sounded confident, and her brisk walk showed no hesitation. Still, her attention was darting here and there, and her left hand kept reaching up to touch one of the whistles, as if to be certain she hadn’t lost it.

Excited to be getting out of the ever-fun stretching and

stunt practice, we girls lined up as straight as we could manage. I suppose I should admit I was the only one not particularly excited. Sure, it was great to skip the hard practice moves for a day. But it was much harder to think of having to go back to Beverly Hills and face my old squad. Not that they would see me, of course. But I would see them—and worse, I'd be surrounded by sharp-eyed witches who were watching to see how I reacted to my old team in front of my new team. Joy.

Field trips are interesting in the witch world. They don't require parental permission slips, but they do require permission from the witches' council. Apparently, it's one thing for a witch or two to pop themselves somewhere, but when you get sixteen cheerleaders and their coach, you need permissions, permits, and a lot of coordination between individual invisibility spells and the big group invisibility spell we would use to travel to and from the gym.

The best thing about field trip magic, for me, was that the teacher—or Coach Gertie, in this case—was in charge of it. I didn't have to demonstrate publicly how little control I still had over my personal invisibility spell. Sure, I could turn invisible when I was really scared and upset. But invisibility on demand was still far beyond my meager skills.

On a scale of one to ten, though, looking like an invisibility spell loser was a six, compared with a solid platinum ten for the whole “can't go home again” thing. I know it was

evil of me, but I held on to a faint hope that we'd find my old team had fallen apart without me.

Naturally, we managed to pop in and find the team productively training, despite my secret wish to find them at a loss without "Pru the Magnificent" as they had sometimes called me when I'd created a particularly fun routine. But, no. My old coach had broken the cheerleaders into small groups to practice different skills.

I could see Maddie in a group working on a cheer/flip combo. "That's right!" Pom-poms shook. "Yeah!" Pom-poms on hips. "Spirit is the key, we're pumping it up for"—backflip to a perfect landing: feet planted, pom-poms in the air, arms in a sharp V—"a victory!"

I looked away, my stomach churning with a hungry clawing sensation. Maybe it was just that I hadn't eaten much for lunch. Or maybe it was because I had taught her that move. We had practiced it in my pool and learned to do it on the diving board too.

My old rival, Chezzie, was the new head cheerleader. She was leading a group of newbies in a cheer. "V-I-C-T-O-R-Y, hold the V, dot the I, and rock that C-T-O-R-Y!" The new girls moved together, held their poms-poms at the same height, and shook them in sync.

In short, the newest cheerleaders were nearly perfect, after only a few weeks of practice. So Chezzie was good. Another sweet-and-sour truth.

I suddenly realized that, despite my deep, dark wishes earlier, I didn't really want the squad to fail. But did they have to be so good without me? It was so hard to watch them without feeling like I should be there, standing where Chezzie stood.

Elektra came up behind me. "So what's so great about them? They're practicing, just like we do. Big deal."

"Look how tight they snap their moves." I pointed at the girls as they went through a simple but beautifully clean warm-up lineup of bucket, U, V, and L's. "Look how they work together."

Coach Gertie herded the other girls close so they could hear what I was saying. One of them said, so low that I couldn't tell who it was, "They look like robots the way they move together."

"Not robots! Look at those smiles. They like what they're doing, even though it's hard. Look at that leg bruise! That comes from challenging yourself to be better every time you practice. And the practice shows when you compete." I hadn't expected the resistance, but I probably should have. Witches were not encouraged to be impressed by mortal things.

It hurt to see Maddie so happy, and to see the squad complete without me. I thought I had kicked the dust of Beverly Hills off my feet completely when Maddie betrayed me, but I guess I hadn't.

I mean, I knew I shouldn't be so petty. After all, I wasn't

likely to attract the attention of Brent, my former crush, from a zillion miles away. But, worse than setting her sights on my interest, Maddie hadn't 'fessed up about it. That was unforgivable in my book—we had been best friends since kindergarten. Sure, technically, we hadn't been on the same squad when she went crush poaching, but that wasn't my fault—or choice—and she knew that. She knew my heart was with the team I'd been on for so long. The team where I was a great cheerleader, not the one where I'd made the cut by the skin of my teeth. She knew I had hoped to convince my parents to move back to Beverly Hills so that I could resume my interrupted life. She knew the team was everything to me.

As I watched my former squad practice and hit almost every complex move they tried, I could see the competition choreography coming through in everything they did. They wanted their fourth win. Wanted it bad. No team had done it. Ever. Only three teams had ever gotten to the point where they had won three national championships in a row.

Even invisible, and standing with my new team, I felt like I used to feel when I belonged to them. A rush of blood to my head that sounded like a "Win!" chant in my ears. I wanted them to take that fourth championship. At the same time, I wanted success for the Witches. And that success wasn't going to happen if I couldn't make them see what my old team had that they didn't.

It wasn't an easy shift to make, especially here. Faced with

my old team, working cooperatively and looking like contenders, my new team looked . . . like junior amateur hour, with a bad attitude to boot.

I had to change that. And it had to start with the attitude about magic being better than anything. Sure, it was kewl. But it wasn't allowed in mortal competition. And I was the only one who understood that completely. Even Coach Gertie didn't always get it.

"I don't get what's so great about all that precision," said Yvette. She didn't say it meanly. But she meant it from the bottom of her toes.

And that's what I needed to show them—in a spectacularly witchy way. But how? I had one idea. The only problem was, I couldn't do it. It was magic, and it was way beyond my skill level. So I'd have to ask someone else to do it. And I'd have to ask in such a way that no one's first thought would be that I was asking because I didn't know how to do it myself.

"Coach Gertie," I whispered, even though I knew that we were in a bubble that made us not only invisible to the mortal cheerleaders but also inaudible. "Do you think that a freeze spell might allow us to go a little closer, so I could be more specific about what they're doing?"

"Excellent idea, Prudence. Please do." Unfortunately, Coach Gertie had only understood half of what I had wanted her to.

Never fear, though, I was prepared for that. I looked down, as if I hesitated for any other reason besides that I couldn't possibly pull off the freeze spell on an entire squad of mortal cheerleaders. "Agatha may not approve of my using magic against mortals during school hours." Which really, when you stop to think about it, doesn't sound that bogus. Agatha hates my guts, and everybody knows it.

Coach Gertie paled a little. "Oh my, there are so many rules for a field trip, aren't there?"

Amen to that, sister.

Coach Gertie raised her hands and quickly chanted,

"Dancing, twirling, leaping, cheering
Freeze for me squad of Beverly Hills
Freeze in perfect form and drills
That we may see skills we are fearing."

I was a little surprised at the insight that Coach Gertie's spell revealed. The witches were fearing what they didn't know about mortal cheering. I could so relate.

The Beverly Hills cheerleaders froze where they were as soon as Coach Gertie finished her spell. Perfect for show-and-tell, without the embarrassing need for a mind-wipe later on.

Coach Gertie released the group invisibility spell and said, "Let's go see what we need to do for our first regional competition, girls."

Tara gave me a little shoulder as she brushed by me to examine the team close up. She didn't look happy, and I wasn't sure why until I heard her mutter, "I'm not afraid of any mortal cheerleaders."

My bracelet tingled, letting me know she was telling a big fat lie. I learned three things from that: One, Coach Gertie knew her girls well; two, be careful how you frame a spell or incantation because it can make someone mad; and three, Tara was afraid of the mortal cheerleader moves I was trying to teach them. And if *she* was, the rest of the girls were too. Duh. They weren't used to working without a magical safety net.

I churned over how I could use that information as I walked toward Maddie, who was poised in a classic hamstring stretch using a Splitflex very much like the one the team had given me as a parting gift when I left Beverly Hills for Salem. The witches were afraid. But there was no reason they had to be. We could use spells to help break falls and avoid collisions during practice. And we could use them to help monitor our moves, too. That would give us all the advantage we needed over our mortal counterparts—at least for practice. For the actual competition, we wouldn't be able to do more than protect ourselves from grave injury.

In the mortal world, I'd learned that a good aide, like the Splitflex, could improve your work when all else failed. Why wouldn't the same thing hold true for the magical world? Use

what you have. Use what you know. How many times had I heard that in cheering practice? Too many to count.

So I went up to Maddie and pointed at the Splitflex. "This helps her stretch her muscles so that she can do a perfect split time after time."

"Who cares?" Elektra wasn't about to hide her contempt for all things mortal.

I looked at them, and then at Maddie on the floor in her perfect split. I slid down the floor until I was beside her, my split just as perfect, even without the stretching aide. And then I rose in the air three feet, raised my arms over my head gracefully, and rotated around the axis of my perfect split. Some of the girls oohed and aahed. It looked great, and I knew it. I could see myself in the full-length mirrored wall of the practice room.

I pointed to the mirrors. "You try. And watch yourself."

They did. And they weren't happy when they compared their moves to mine. Tara squealed when she stomped her own toe.

I smiled. "Bruises are good, remember? Witches aren't wimps, are they?"

"No!" They all tried again. More heart, but no more coordination. Oh, well. It takes a season to make a championship team.

As we all gathered together to leave Beverly Hills behind, I said to Coach. "Have you asked the headmistress

for permission to put mirrors in the practice room?"

Coach shook her head. "But I'll get them today, whether she likes it or not."

"That wasn't as bad as I thought it would be, Pru. Maybe we can learn something from the mortals." Tara was being awfully conciliatory. I waited for the other shoe to drop. But, instead, she said, "Of course, we could show them how to improve their cheering, too."

"You have some ideas for routines?" I tried not to sound skeptical, even though I was.

"A few."

It was now or never, I knew. I had to take advantage of Tara's good mood. I'd hesitated to give out my invitations, despite the fact that the date for my party was warp speed ahead. I just wasn't sure that anyone would come. There's nothing that deals social suicide to a girl quicker than throwing a party nobody comes to. But I couldn't afford to wait any longer. It was time to face my fears.

I watched the bubble invitations float through the gym, landing in the hands of each girl and gently dissolving away to reveal a silver-edged invitation.

"This is for a birthday party?" Yvette sounded doubtful. "But it's so soon."

I had already thought up an excuse to make so they'd forgive the last-minute notice. "Yes, I—" But I didn't get a chance to give it.

"You have a pool *and* a bowling alley?" Elektra was clearly impressed. Score one for Pru.

"How very mortal of you," Tara said. Weeyotch.

I knew a sales opportunity when I saw it. "It's just one lane, but it will be fun. My brother is a geek and he's done some magical alterations so the game won't be boring old mortal bowling action."

I could feel the rising excitement, but confusion and doubt were still winning out. "I've never been to a sleepover before. I've seen them in the movies, though."

Tara spoke with head-cheerleader dismissiveness. "It sounds an awful lot like something only mortals would do."

"Why should mortals have all the fun of staying up all night telling juicy stories and swapping gossip while eating pizza and doing each other's hair and nails?" It wasn't hard to sound sincere, because I actually believed what I was saying. "Besides, I have some magic surprises in store, but I don't want to give them away yet." This was an out-and-out lie, and my bracelet zapped me for telling it. But I would make it happen, now that it had occurred to me that a regular sleepover just wouldn't cut it.

"I thought you already were sixteen?" Tara said critically, as if searching for a technicality that would let her declare the party off-limits to her team.

"I am. But I had my birthday on the road, so my mom is letting me have my party now. It should be fun."

"Sure. I guess." She squinted at me. "You're only inviting the squad?"

"And a few others, too."

"You need to invite some cute guys."

Tell me about it. But I needed an in on the cute guy front. Not that I'd admit it to her. "Like who?"

Tara tapped her fingertip on her forehead as if she were counting. "All the football and basketball first-stringers, of course. That should be good enough if we invite a few of the kewler girls to even out the numbers."

"Sounds good. I guess I can make some more invitations." I wondered if Mom would mind that I'd just doubled the number of invitees to the party? I decided it was one of those things I would ask for forgiveness for, rather than ask permission. After all, I needed to start making a top ten list for upcoming school dances.

"Only kewl kids, right?" Tara said, examining me closely.

"My friends." I tried to bluff. "All of my friends are kewl."

"You're not inviting that geeky guy, are you? Or those girls who hang out with him?"

I hesitated, knowing I needed to stand up for my friends, but afraid that if I did, Tara would refuse to come to the party—and make sure the other cheerleaders shunned it too.

Fortunately, Coach Gertie called us to a huddle, and I didn't have to lie. At least, not yet.



Chapter 13



Samuel had agreed to tutor me every night so I'd be ready to act like a real witch during the party. I was terrified I'd slip up and humiliate myself by showing my mortal roots. The biggest thing was really mind over magic, so to speak. Like when you have to learn a foreign language, I kept translating my mortal way of doing things into the magic way. When I remembered.

The problem was, I didn't always remember to translate. The Dorklock would rather go thirsty than get his water from the tap any longer. He loved being able to pop his own food, even changing what Mom served for dinner, if he chose—despite the fact that Dad wasn't too happy about the fact that everyone didn't have the same thing for dinner

anymore. Not to mention that Mom often had to change the foods Tobias picked (for example, putting carrots on his plate to replace the fruit-flavored jelly beans he preferred).

Me? I'm happy with what Mom pops for dinner, and it really isn't a big deal to get a glass from the cupboard and pour my water at the sink. But that's got to change, and fast. I considered bribing the Dorklock to zap me every time he caught me doing something the mortal way. But that was too scary a thought. Giving the Dorklock carte blanche to zap me was downright dangerous. I could end up served as pizza to my own sweet sixteen party.

Samuel had agreed to quiz me during our tutoring session about how I should handle the next day's to-do list using magic rather than the ways I'd learned growing up in the mortal realm. I'm not sure he really understood why it mattered so much to me, but he knew it did, and that was enough for him.

Dad didn't understand either, but there wasn't anything he wouldn't do to help me be successful and happy at school. This was not, however, like the time I couldn't master multiplication and he made a chart and quizzed me for a whole weekend before the multiplication bee—which I won. He knew the sweet sixteen party was my way of making a place for myself at school. He'd even considered staying home for the party to act as master of ceremonies like he had when I was younger, until Mom and I had started

talking about some of the special magical party games and surprises I wanted to wow my guests. Then he decided that a weekend of golf away was a great idea, and we all breathed a sigh of relief.

Dad didn't mind Samuel coming over every night for extra tutoring, though. For one thing, Samuel was respectful of his mortal status and impressed with his job as an advertising guru. For another, Samuel never showed off his magic skills like the Dorklock was always doing.

So when Samuel arrived, I took out my list and prepared to make sure I did everything the way a witch who'd been a witch from birth would.

But instead of reading the list, Samuel handed it back to me, along with a small gold band. I stopped breathing for a second, afraid he was proposing. But then I got real. We were sixteen and even Samuel couldn't possibly think we were ready for marriage.

"What's this?" I asked as I frantically tried to think of ways to reject a promise ring without hurting his feelings.

"You wanted to break your old mortal habits fast, right?"

I nodded. Yeah? What did that have to do with promise rings?

"When you wear this, it will vibrate if you start doing something the mortal way. If you don't switch to the witch way, it will vibrate harder."

Oh. So it wasn't a promise ring. It was a "break your

habits" ring. I should have known. I put it on immediately. "Thanks! You are truly brilliant, you know."

"I know." He pointed to the fireplace. "Can we have a fire? It's a little chilly."

"Sure." I leaped up and grabbed the box of matches on the mantel. The ring started to vibrate. I put the matchbox down, pointed my index finger at the logs, and started the flames with magic.

Samuel clapped. "See?"

"Did you do that on purpose?" I wouldn't have imagined he could be so sneaky.

He nodded. "You really do need to start thinking like a witch, Pru. Although you're cute when you forget." He grinned and blushed at the same time, pleased that I hadn't thought he had it in him. "So. Will it be potions or transfiguration tonight, madame?"

Halfway through our session on turning toads into human beings and back into toads again, the mortal realm interrupted our work. In other words, Angelo and his mother came to call.

Now, normally Samuel is a geek-fan of all things mortal. But right away he didn't like Angelo. Maybe it was because Angelo smiled at me and I instantly forgot to introduce Samuel to him. Or maybe it was because I forgot Samuel was in the room until he stepped up and introduced himself.

Angelo looked at Samuel, and they sized each other up right in front of my eyes. Sigh. The two guys in my

life looked at each other and frowned. Not good.

Things got worse when I made a huge slip that I blame entirely on the way my crush on Angelo made my brains leak right out of my ears. I said, in a bright, loud, cheerleader voice, "Samuel's just a friend. He's helping me plan my sweet sixteen party."

"Happy birthday." Angelo looked at me curiously. For a second I wondered why. And then I realized what I had done. I had told him I was having a party. If I didn't invite him . . . crappaccino.

Angelo was much too polite to ask if he was invited, thankfully. However, the bigger problem was Mrs. Kenton. Had she heard what I said? I looked at her and couldn't tell.

As much as I liked Angelo, I so did not like his mother. I can't quite pinpoint why. Maybe because Mrs. Kenton was so nosy. Nice enough for a grown-up, I guess. But she was always trying to do good things in the pushiest way possible. Right now she was trying to rope Mom and me into volunteering in the community again.

"I have a marvelous opportunity for you—please don't thank me, I had to pull a few strings, but you and Prudence are so dear that I just felt it was the right thing to do."

Mom had the witch-in-the-headlights look, but her smile was still pasted in place. "I don't think the Neighborhood Watch—"

"Oh, nothing so mundane, my dear. No. Not at all. It's just the hottest volunteer work in the whole town—working Old Salem Village on Halloween Day!"

Oh, joy. I hoped Mom would be able to refuse this "favor" of Mrs. Kenton's. Otherwise, I'd be spending time dressed like Mrs. Goode, my history teacher. Not to mention living life the way she did all those centuries ago.

Unfortunately, Mom was unable to think of any better excuse than, "I just can't commit to anything until I get finished with my daughter's birthday party." Great. So if Mrs. Kenton happened to have missed my faux pas, she got a second chance with Mom's.

"How old are you, dear?" Mrs. Kenton smiled, and I wondered if she was just being crafty or if she really hadn't heard me tell Angelo I was having a sweet sixteen party.

"Sixteen."

"Oh!" She put her hand to her chest. "A sweet sixteen party. How darling!"

I didn't really believe she would be pushy enough to force me to invite Angelo then and there, although I think Mom knew what was coming. "Is it girls only?"

Ah. A way out. "I'm having a slumber party that's girls only." Angelo couldn't be mad at me for not inviting him to a girls-only sleepover.

"Yes. I think you'll agree that's a wise practice, at their age," Mom cut in, stopping me from adding that the pool

and bowling party before the sleepover was going to be coed. As if.

“Oh, I completely understand.” Mrs. Kenton sounded completely disappointed. “But if you need Angelo to help with decorations or blowing up balloons or anything, he’ll be more than happy to pitch in.”

“I think we’ll be fine,” Mom replied.

And we would have been, if Tobias hadn’t been lurking around, looking for ways to cause trouble. “Hey, I thought you said boys could come to the pool and bowling party before the sleepover. I already asked Tim and Xerxes and they both said yes.”

Caught out, Mom stammered, “Well, of course Tim and Xerxes can come—”

“And Samuel, too, right? He was going to teach me how to”—He stopped just in time, with a glance at Mrs. Kenton—“uh. He was going to teach me how to swim with flippers.”

Right. Samuel had promised to teach him how to grow webbing on his feet when he got in the pool, to create a natural pair of flippers. Not something either of them could do with a mortal at the party. At last this point got across to the Dorklock.

Too late, because Mrs. Kenton was just about to believe that we were dissing her precious and perfect son Angelo. “Oh, I see.” Her mouth was pinched tight, probably to pre-

vent herself from telling us off. "Only children from your private school. Of course."

Mom, softhearted as always, immediately reacted to Mrs. Kenton's hurt feelings as she never would have to polite social bullying. "Pru, I guess we can't keep it a secret any longer. Why don't you run up and fetch Angelo's invitation?"

His invitation? For a minute I looked at Samuel and thought of the bubbles he and I had created, but then I realized that Mom just wanted me to pop a normal invitation out of sight of Mrs. Kenton. So I did.

Mrs. Kenton glanced at it and said, "This Saturday?"

"Yes. It is short notice, we had to put the party together quickly." With a little gasp of hope that she tried to hide, Mom added, "If he won't be able to make it, we understand perfectly."

"Oh no, he'd never refuse an invitation given to him by a sweet girl like Prudence! We're neighbors, after all. And we're going to be volunteering together too. We're neighbors."

Neighbors. She said it like it meant "twins separated at birth." I had a feeling that Mrs. Kenton was going to be hiring someone to take over Angelo's weekend yard jobs just so he could come to our party.

After Angelo and his mother left—with promises that we would have the best volunteer gigs at Old Salem Village on Halloween—Samuel said, "So you're going to mind-wipe them, right?"

Mom just shook her head. "I'm afraid not. We're just going to have to figure out how to handle having a mortal at Pru's party."

Oh, joy. "Why did you make me invite him in the first place?"

"His mother wasn't going to give up too easily, Pru." Mom sighed. "She isn't happy with Angelo's school and she's decided that the private school you attend would be perfect for him. She's been nagging me to make an appointment with Agatha for some time."

"Oh, boy. Well, at least if you cave, you know Agatha won't." I had to laugh at the thought of Agatha going head-to-head with a determined Mrs. Kenton.

Maybe Samuel was right. Maybe if Mom wouldn't magic us a solution, I should. A real witch would. But then I'd have to deal with the wrath of Mom. The evil part of me wondered if that would get me points with Agatha.

"We'll manage, honey." My lie detector bracelet tingled. Great. Another pep rally-worthy lie.

"It's going to ruin everything." But the bracelet works both ways. I can tell when other people are lying, but I can also tell when I am. And my bracelet said I didn't mind that Angelo was coming to the party. Which was just plain insane.

"I'm not going to wipe all three of the Kentons' memories about your party, Pru. Not to mention everyone that woman tells about it."

"But I can't do any of the really fun witch things we have planned if he comes," I pointed out.

"Sure, you can. I'll cast a bemusement spell on him and he will think he's imagining what he sees."

A bemusement spell? "How is that better?"

"One mortal mind affected by magic, as opposed to three or more?" Mom said sharply, like I should have figured that out by myself.

Her snarkiness made me mad. "I guess you're good at all this thinking about how to do the least damage to mortals, since you've had so much practice. But what about the witches at the party? Some of them have never seen a mortal before." Okay. So that was an exaggeration. But, still. "What do you want me to do about them?"

"They'll be fine, honey. You'll explain what happened, and they'll understand."

Sure, they would. They'd understand what I'd come to realize. I was more mortal than witch, even if I did have some magical powers. I let my frustration show with a tornado of confetti in the middle of the kitchen. "They'll understand I'm a total loser." If Angelo came to the party, the kewl kids were going to get a chance to compare me to a regular mortal. And I was going to be outed. Big-time.

"Honey, I'm sure that's not—"

"Mom!" I shouted it, even though I knew I risked having the party cancelled and being grounded until I was two

hundred years old. “I was always forbidden to use my magic, remember? I don’t have as much practice as you do. Maybe you should send me to a witch boarding school. That way I won’t have to come up against any mortals at all—not even Dad.”

We’d both forgotten about Samuel standing there. The party might have been history if we’d kept fighting. Fortunately, Samuel came up with an idea that made everything work: First, scrap the pool/bowling theme. Instead, Mom would find a big hall to rent for the party and we could create a paintball course in one room and a cheerleaders rock the universe main room. The paintball course would have magical hazards that Angelo would just think were special effects. I hoped. And the cheerleaders’ room would have a rock wall and climbing ropes so that Mom’s bemusement spell would only have to be minimal to keep Angelo from noticing that the flying wasn’t done on the ropes for anyone but him.

It looked like having to fit things around Angelo actually might make the party the kewlest thing ever. Sometimes intense pressure makes diamonds, or so I’d heard in seventh-grade earth science.

But there was one last detail I needed to attend to. I waited till Mom hurried off to make all the last-minute arrangements for the new party theme. Then I turned to Samuel and, stopping myself just before I unclasped the

bracelet the mortal way, sent it flying toward him with magic. It stopped just short of his nose. "Can you make sure this thing is working?"

"Why?"

"I just want to double-check—for practice tomorrow," I lied. No way was I going to tell him that the bracelet was telling me I was secretly happy to have a mortal at my party when I was trying to turn my back on all that. It had to be broken. It had to be.

"Sure. Just a sec." He popped away and returned thirty seconds later, with metal shavings in his hair. He handed me the bracelet. "Works great."

"Perfect." That is, if courting disaster by having a catastrophic crush on a mortal counted as perfect.



Chapter 14



The party went pretty well. Angelo may have been a mortal, but he sure had charmed the pom-poms off the cheerleaders. I guess I wasn't the only one who was susceptible to the smile and the dimple.

I didn't have time to be jealous, though. I was too busy having fun. Mom had done such a great job making the magic elements look almost special effects—possible that for one second I wished I had been talking to Maddie and could have invited her to come.

Angelo had needed only the lightest of bemusement spells, and I bet we could have gotten away without it if Mom wasn't in overprotective mode as usual. Amazingly, he'd

charmed a group of witch girls without making enemies of the kewl guys from school either.

The only one who didn't say his name with a smile was Samuel. He kept watch on Angelo from across the room, telling me, "I don't want him ruining anything—or flipping out if he figures out this is all magic and we're witches."

All I said was, "Thanks." With guys, when they get into big protector mode, all you can do is say thank you and stay as far away as you can.

I have to confess that even though I defended him to Samuel, I had been worried that Angelo's presence might ruin the party. But by the time I said good-bye to everyone but the cheerleaders who were staying for the sleepover, I knew he'd done just the opposite. The token mortal had been a hit. Whodathunkit?

The cheerleaders were still talking about him when we all changed into pajamas and gathered in my living room—which had been carefully furnished with big, soft pillows and lots of cuddly blankets so everyone could curl up however they liked.

"What do we do now?" Yvette asked.

"I know. I know. Let's play Truth or Dare." Elektra had a half smile on her face when she looked at me that made me just a touch uneasy. But the whole party had gone so well that I decided it was not worth worrying about.

Everyone else agreed enthusiastically, so I didn't object

despite the unfortunate fact that Truth or Dare was one of those games I both loved and hated. Loved it when I was hearing something juicy that I never would have heard if the teller weren't more scared of what dare she'd have to risk than of answering a personal question. Hated it when I was the one in the hot seat and I had to decide whether I'd rather confess to being a fool or just act like one.

Of course, my previous experience had been playing with mortals. With witches, things got way more interesting. So what kinds of dares were fair in a game with witches? Anything goes. Turn someone into a toad? Pop them an ice-cream sundae with sardines and earthworms and require them to eat it, slowly, with their fingers? You name it, and the witches thought of it.

It quickly became clear that certain girls were out for blood. While I asked a very mild question when it was my turn to Truth or Dare Yvette, the rest of them didn't hold back. At all. I found out more about the love lives and indiscretions of teenage witches than I had in weeks of listening to locker room gossip. It was quite amazing how many innovative ways these girls had found to outwit, outlast, and outplay their parents' protective spells, charms, and potions.

I was the one everyone really wanted to know the dirt about, of course, being the new girl with a mortal twist. Which really put my rep on the line in a way that I had no

idea how to control. Should I take the dare or risk telling the truth to an embarrassing question? I didn't have a clue. Not being a complete dunderhead, I realized that first thing—when Charity chose Dare over Truth and Sunita commanded her to turn herself into a mouse and pluck a hair from the cat.

"You'll have to choose a new dare," I interrupted. "We don't have a cat."

You would think I'd said we didn't have a bathroom, the way they all stared at me.

Tara said, very slowly, "You don't have a familiar?"

"No." Uh-oh. Had the great party already turned bad? I knew about familiars from TV. And Grandmama had one of those little dogs she carried in a purse. I think it was a teacup poodle. But it was scared of everything, so I'd never seen more than its shivering little head peeking out at me. "Do I need one?"

"Duh." Elektra was always happy to point out my cluelessness. "How else do you get messages from the high council?"

Was she teasing me? Leading me on to see how much I'd believe? I hated the feeling of not knowing which way was up. "Why would they want to talk to me? I'm just a kid."

Yvette looked at me with alarm, and I realized that Elektra wasn't kidding. "Well, your mom, then. She has to have a familiar."

I resorted to the oldest excuse in the book. “We don’t have pets. My dad is allergic.” It always worked back in Beverly Hills.

Elektra sighed. “Here, then. I want to see a mouse pluck a hair out of the cat.”

All of a sudden there was a kitten in my life. A real, live, coal-black kitten with the sweetest little face. I looked up, “But my dad—”

“I put a dander-free spell on it.” Elektra sighed like I should have already known that she would have done that. Which, I suppose I would have—if I’d known it was even possible.

I don’t know whether I would have been in trouble for not having a familiar or not, because just then one of the ghosts came in and dropped a note in my lap. It read, “Happy Birthday!” with a red neon glow, and then smoked away before any of the girls crawling over their pillows toward me could read it.

Several girls asked in chorus, “Who’s that from?”

“Anonymous.” It had to be Daniel again. But I wasn’t about to share my suspicions with anyone. I’m quite certain that Agatha would not be happy to hear that her grandson was sending me notes, even if I wasn’t sending replies (not that any reply seemed to be required, of course).

Elektra was impressed. “How cool. The ghosts in our house won’t talk to me.”

"Why not?"

"They're mad at my dad for trying to have them exorcised, I guess. Which they deny—they try to claim they won't speak to anyone too young to show proper respect for ghosts. But they really mean Dad's age and anyone younger—which is about him, not me. Or so Mom said when she kicked him out."

Finally, something I could sink my teeth into. "Your parents got divorced? Who got custody of you?" I still didn't understand how this whole marriage/divorce thing worked in the witchworld—I mean, some people can't even last ten years in a marriage when they're mortal and live for less than a hundred years. What happened to the whole "till death do us part" thing when you lived centuries instead of decades?

She looked surprised, though, when I said the word "custody." "I live with my mom, of course. Nobody goes to live with their dads—that would be insane."

"Why insane?" I wouldn't have minded a bit if my dad had divorced my mom instead of moving to Salem. I would have stayed with him. Maybe then Maddie would never have betrayed me. Maybe. "Samuel lives with his dad."

"That geek? He's the exception, not the rule. His mom died." Tara dismissed him with a flip of her hair.

"Can we talk about interesting things, please? This is Truth or Dare, not Bore and Snore," Celestina said.

It was my turn to tell the truth or take a dare. It was

Jakeera's turn to ask the question. I didn't know her well, except that I'd seen her signature move at witch games—a twirl from floor to ceiling that started out slow and stately, went to whirling dervish speed, and then slowed as she floated to the floor. It was an impressive move, but I'm not sure what it had to do with cheering, because she couldn't cheer as she twirled.

“Pru. Truth or Dare?”

I decided it was time to put Samuel's bracelet to good use. After all, it had noted several times when the “truth” some girl was telling us was actually a lie. “Are you going to ask me something so awful, I'll need to move to the moon after I tell you the truth?”

Jakeera laughed. “Of course not.” The other girls just grinned.

My bracelet didn't tingle, so I decided to take a chance. “Truth.” Probably the only time in the history of Truth or Dare that the truth was less likely to steal my status than trying to fulfill a dare that my magic skills weren't up to.

Jakeera grinned evilly, and I had a faint fear that Samuel's bracelet had let me down. “What did your note say?”

“Happy Birthday.” That was easy. Who'd know anything about anything from that sentiment! The bonus was that I really was telling the truth too.

For one second, I thought I had dodged the biggest rep-wrecking bullet possible. But nope. The big slide came from

doing something I'd done a thousand times before. Ordering pizza.

"Who's hungry?" I asked, needing a break from the game and hoping to distract them with food.

"I am." The answer came in a chorus of voices, so if anyone didn't chime in, I didn't notice.

"Great. Let me order the pizza." I summoned the phone and hit speed dial for my favorite pizza place. "Anyone object to pepperoni?" I looked up to find everyone staring at me open-mouthed.

"Hello?" The phone took my attention from the girls before I could figure out what was going on. Witches ate pepperoni. Didn't they?

I spoke into the phone, slowly and clearly so the place wouldn't deliver some awful sardine concoction by mistake. "I'd like four pizzas, please, two pepperoni and two with extra cheese." The ring that Samuel had given me vibrated. But I thought it was the phone in my hand, so I ignored the warning just a few seconds longer than I should have.

"You're *ordering* pizza? For *delivery*?" Yvette said incredulously.

"Sure. Why not?"

It took me a second, staring at their astonished faces. Then I got it. Duh. Because only mortals order pizza, Pru. For not knowing that, you are sentenced to life on the scud side of the lunchroom.



Chapter 15



There was no hiding my humiliation from Mom. One second there were sixteen giggling cheerleaders in her house. The next, there was complete—and very awkward—silence as all the girls went from thinking I wasn’t in regular classes because I was Agatha’s enemy to thinking I didn’t even know how to pop four pizzas for my own party.

Mom came up with the pizza that the delivery guy delivered the mortal way. She didn’t notice the silence instantly, probably because I was busy petting my new kitten and that caught her attention first.

She floated the pizza boxes in midair, directing the pizzas to spin out and distribute slices throughout the room. “Pru, your dad is allergic—”

“Elektra put a dander-free spell on her.” Because I couldn’t. But I didn’t need to say it. Everyone in the room—Mom included—already knew it. “I’m a witch now, remember? I need a familiar.”

“Oh.” She was distracted from the whole kitten thing by the silence in the room. Being a good mom once every fifth full moon or so, she said nothing about it. Directly. Indirectly, she asked, “Having fun, girls?”

There were a chorus of yeses that brought the party back on track as girls grabbed slices of pizza out of the air. But everything had changed. I was sooo not looking forward to school on Monday.

Mom looked at me sympathetically, which was not kewl. She could have warned me—but she’s used to doing things the mortal way too, so I bet she didn’t notice. There was a little guilt in her look, but more “poor Pru.” “What are you going to name it?”

“Her.” I nuzzled the kitten, which was probably the only living thing in that room that thought I was competent. “I’m going to name her . . . Disaster.” It seemed fitting. Especially since, beginning with Tara and ending with Sunita, all the girls found an excuse to leave without spending the night.

I have to say this for Mom, she isn’t afraid to ask the tough questions. She waited to have a heart-to-heart with me about what had gone wrong until I’d slept off the late night

of pizza and social suicide and stumbled down the steps (ignoring the vibrations of my ring—really, what did it matter if I did things the mortal way anymore?).

“Are you really going to name your kitten Disaster?” She could have asked a million questions, but that was the one she opened with. Typical Mom.

“Yes. You should see my room—you’d think she was a tiger instead of a tiny kitten the way she’s scratched things up.” I was going to call her Sassy for short, but I didn’t share that fact with Mom.

Apparently, the kitten’s name was all she needed to understand that something bad had happened. “What can I do to help, honey?”

“Can you get me out of remedial classes? That’s the only way I’ll ever prove I’m not the scud who can only order pizza the mortal way.”

“Oh.” She didn’t question me any further, just set her lips and twitched her nose. “Okay.” She sighed. “It’s time to deal with this, Prudence. I’m sorry I didn’t realize how important it was.” She stood up from the table, sending her teacup to the sink, where, no doubt, she’d wash it and put it away the mortal way. No wonder I was having trouble learning how to act like a witch, even with the ring Samuel had made for me.

I guess my thoughts were clear on my face, because she popped the teacup away and sighed again. “It’s been a long

time since I was sixteen. I may not have had to deal with the problems you face, but I had similar problems of my own."

She looked at me. "Maybe Agatha was right, after all. My adapting to the mortal world, keeping you from using your magic, maybe it was unwise. I just—" She broke off. "Oh well, I can't change the past—at least not without a lot of unforeseen consequences. I think it's time to talk to her again."

We popped into Agatha's office without an appointment.

Agatha looked even more surprised than I was. "How did you get in here?"

Mom was focused and—annoyingly—serene. "I have my ways, as you may recall."

For a moment, I felt sorry for Agatha. She didn't have a clue she was facing a woman who had made a Girl Scout leader cry after the leader had told me—in front of eight other girls—that I was hopeless with knots and should just give up.

Apparently, Agatha did have a clue, because she stood up to face Mom. "I prefer to deal with civilized people who make appointments."

Mom didn't budge. "It's time for her to take the test, Agatha."

Agatha didn't spit ice pellets at her, to my great surprise. Instead, she raised one white eyebrow, rippling the wrinkles in her face in a truly creepy way. "Who are you to make that decision when it's my name on the school?"

Mom put her hand on my shoulder. "A mom who knows what's good for my daughter."

The news surprised me, but not Agatha, who practically had every wrinkle on her face engaged in active sneering. "You were such a flighty thing when you were a teacher. Taking a classroom of kindergarteners to a butterfly garden? Piffle. We were lucky the wings they gave themselves were not seen by mortals. We had to bury you in the library cataloging books to keep you from causing trouble, as I recall."

Mom had taught at Agatha's? Had worked in the library? I turned to look at her. When? And why hadn't I known?

Mom was not to be distracted, however. She was on a mission. "They made themselves beautiful wings, Agatha. I've never understood why you didn't see that."

Okay. Who had taken my mom and where were all the pod people coming from?

But, with her next sentence, the mom I had known for sixteen years returned. "Prudence has studied hard and if she wants to try taking the test, what's the harm? At the very best she'll pass it and be working hard in the regular classroom to make the school—and you—proud."

Agatha snorted.

Mom ignored her. "At the very worst, she'll know which areas still require some work."

Great. Mom really didn't think I would pass the test, she

was just giving me something to work toward to keep my spirits up.

Agatha gave me a chilly once-over. "I can tell her that without the need for a test. Every area except social skills needs more than a little brushup." Agatha shook her head. "No, the girl needs more of a plaster-and-lathe job, not just a brushup."

Mom frowned. "If this is personal, then I would like to see you think about what is best for the student in your charge, Agatha."

That made the ice queen crack. Big-time. Steam wafted steadily from her heavy white robes. "You dare?"

"My daughter deserves a chance to take the test and pass or fail it on her own merits." Mom still managed to sound both implacable and polite. I don't know how she does it, but I hope it's something I inherited from her. It will come in handy if the Witches actually make it to the regional competition.

Agatha sniffed. "It's just like you, Patience, to believe you know better than those who have the experience and responsibility for this decision."

Mom just stared at her, quietly, as if she was sure Agatha would say yes and she was just politely waiting.

I was ready to run away. Far away. Because after all this, I wasn't sure if I should take the test. What I didn't know could fill a book. Actually, it did fill a book—our family spell book.

I was just ready to stand up and stop the Battle of the Salem Witches, non-sports version, when Agatha spoke.

“Yes.” Nothing else. Just yes. And then it was her turn to wait for a response.

Mom was classy, as always. She just smiled as if Agatha’s cave-in was a foregone conclusion, and said with 100 percent sincerity, “Thank you, Agatha.”

We popped back into the kitchen without any other pleasantries. I don’t know if that was Mom’s doing or Agatha’s, but I knew it wasn’t mine. Which didn’t make me feel any more comfortable about this test that I was apparently going to be taking now. Now that I didn’t want to. Now that I was convinced I would fail.

Mom hugged me. “Don’t worry, Prudence. You’ll do your best. You always do.”

I took a deep breath. Mom had made what I wanted to happen, happen. I really couldn’t take it out on her that I was scared I would fail. Besides, if there’s one thing I know, it’s that concentrating on the possibility of failure will result in failure. Now was not the time to think about everything at stake. Cheerleaders and A-list students needed to pass tests, not fail them, if they wanted to keep the leadership vibe going strong.

I knew she wanted something positive from me. For a minute, I wasn’t sure I could do it, but I mustered my cheer courage and smiled. “You know what they say, Mom: ‘A

good cheerleader never gives up and a great cheerleader never gives in!”

I'm not quite sure she believed I was feeling it, but she just gave me another hug, popped us peanut butter cookies and milk (which I exchanged for carrot sticks and yogurt dip), and promised, “I'll make sure Cousin Seamus fits some more tutoring time in with you.”

At which point, we both realized that Agatha had said yes to the test, but hadn't said a word about when I'd have to take it.

It says a lot about how scared I was that I hadn't noticed. A good cheerleader never forgets the importance of details, and a great cheerleader never lets her guard down until the game is over and done.



Chapter 16



Spirit! We shout it high!
We got what it takes!
Watch us fly!
Spirit! And no more mistakes!

I scratched out my latest attempt at a new cheer for the team. “Mistakes” was too negative, and a cheer has to be positive to the max. I was finding that staying positive was getting harder and harder. No surprise there. There’s nothing fun about feeling like someone who went to the plastic surgeon for a touch-up and ended up looking like a mannequin with Claymation lips. I knew some of those women when I lived in Beverly Hills. Some of them were my friends’ mothers.

I'd been glad for my cheer training when I had to smile like I wasn't freaked out to look them in the lifted eye. I'd wondered if they knew it. Most of the time they acted like they thought they looked perfectly normal. But sometimes . . . sometimes I thought they would have cried if they'd had working tear ducts.

That's the way the other kids at school looked at me all day long. Like I was one of those women. Like they felt sorry for me, but were trying hard to hide it. I suppose the sympathy was better than any catty face-to-face criticism. I suppose. But if I hadn't found an anti-crying spell in the family spell book before school, I would have been a Pru-size fountain all day long.

I didn't even stop by for some much needed real sympathy from Samuel, Maria, or Denise at lunchtime either. Since they were fringies, I knew they'd very helpfully tell me exactly what rumors were being spread about me. My imagination was bad enough—I didn't need a triple dose of reality as well. Instead, I went to the library and stayed there until it was time to return to class.

Clearly, the cheerleaders had spread the news. And I couldn't really blame them. It was juicy news. The new girl acts more like a mortal than a witch. Can she do magic, or is she a poser? The question was in everyone's eyes.

Scratch that. The question was in every *student's* eyes. The teachers were clueless, as usual. Take Coach Gertie, who had

grabbed me the second I arrived at practice. "Pru. We need to register for the regional competition, right?"

"Yes." It was almost painful the way she was smiling at me. She was very pleased about competing. Of course, she didn't have a clue about all those mortal steps required to do so. Which I found out when I asked, in all innocence, "Has the headmistress agreed to pay the fees? Or is that something we need to get from the Witches' Council?"

Coach blinked. "Fees?"

"You know," I said very quietly, as it was occurring to me that Coach might be just as clueless about the little mortal rules as I was about the little witch rules, "it costs money to go to Regionals."

"Money? Of course." She sounded as if she'd never heard of it. And looked as though she thought it was something nasty-smelling.

Tara, who had been standing nearby, looking at me as if I were a victim of a deadly fashion mishap, unhelpfully clarified, "Money, Coach. That stuff mortals trade around to get the things they can't get for themselves. Poor things, not able to pop up stuff like pizza for themselves and all."

Coach ignored the snarky tone. She was focused on her dream of Regionals. "How much money do you think we'll need?"

I realized that giving any information stuck me even deeper in the quicksand of being too familiar with mortal

ways. But Coach Gertie looked so eager. Sigh. "Well, I'm not exactly sure, but I know we were always having fund-raisers at my old school and we were always worried that we didn't have enough."

"Fund-raisers?" Another word Coach Gertie had never heard.

Duh. If you don't use money, you don't need fund-raisers, do you? I really did think too much like a mortal. I had just that second clued in to the absence of bake sales in the lunchroom, or candy bar sales by the football or baseball teams.

"Sure. All the mortal schools do it. For uniforms and buses and equipment and fees for competitions, too."

"Oh." Coach Gertie frowned and fiddled with her whistle.

This was clearly a big problem. "How do the teams here get the uniforms and equipment?"

"We pop them."

Duh. Was I ever going to shake the mortal dust off my mind? "Oh. Well, can't we just pop the fees?"

Tara said, with real delight, "That's against the Witches' Council rules."

Of course it was.

"Oh." I couldn't think of another response. My brain was shut down, a victim of the gaping abyss between thinking like a mortal and thinking like a witch.

"I guess we just won't be able to compete. Too bad." Tara

had a gleam in her eye. I knew what was coming next. No competition meant Coach Gertie would have no use for the new girl.

Coach Gertie sighed deeply in disappointment. “This is one thing I can’t see my way around. It’s big trouble to pop up a wad of mortal money—throws the mortal realm into chaos.”

For one second, I contemplated letting it all go down the way Tara wanted it to. For one second. But I couldn’t bear to let her push me out this way. I couldn’t go home to Beverly Hills and my old team. I couldn’t do witchcraft competently. The only thing I could do well was cheer. Besides, giving in was too close to giving up. And I’m allergic to giving up. “How do you buy things you want from the mortal realm?”

“We don’t have a lot of dealings with the mortal world in that way,” Coach explained. “We let mortals handle their money and we take care of ourselves with magic.”

I thought of Grandmama, who had a fondness for mortal gadgets. How did she get them if she hadn’t found a way to get her hands on mortal money without breaking the Council rules? “Is it against the rules to get money from mortals? I think my Grandmama once bought a mortal piece of artwork by popping a nice diamond ring and pawning it for cash.”

I held my breath, hoping I wasn’t getting Grandmama in

trouble with the Council. "If that's not a problem with the Council, then we could just raise funds among mortals. It is a mortal competition, after all, so it isn't like taking money out of the mortal realm."

Coach Gertie beamed like a spotlight at me. "Excellent idea."

Take that, Tara.

I was just about to let myself breathe again when Tara shot back, "And just how are we going to do that? We've never begged for anything before. Especially not mortal money."

Coach got a weird glint in her eye. I knew I was going to regret whatever she said. I knew it. And I was right.

"I believe we can all name just the person to lead our fund-raiser."

Tara gave a pretend-bright smile. "Oh yes, Coach Gertie. Pru is the perfect person for a *mortal* fund-raiser. She understands the *mortal* ways so well."

I smiled back, just as bright and just as fake. "I certainly do understand how to raise money—and how to win a cheering competition, too." I didn't add, *in the mortal world*. It was understood.

I was really getting tired of being given what seemed like tasks Clark Kent could handle only to have them morph to Superman-impossible before my eyes. Take fund-raising. I knew at least a dozen ways to raise funds. My old school

district started us young. In kindergarten, it was wrapping paper and ribbons. By the time we were in high school, we were juggling bake sales, booster sales, car washes, candy, popcorn, a casino night—and my personal favorite that would happen only in Beverly Hills: a chance to get head shots done and sent to a Hollywood agent (who was a football dad).

I rattled these off to an eager Coach Gertie and fifteen underwhelmed cheerleaders—all but the head shot idea. My teammates shot down every suggestion as soon as I spoke them aloud.

Charity, Tara's right-hand witch, said, "We can pop anything we like for lunch. Why would we need a table of things other people had popped?" Her too thin brows rose up in horror. "You aren't asking us to actually *bake* the things, are you?"

"Candy? You'd want us to sell candy? Where? I know you don't get it, Pru," Tara said, with a fake "poor Pru" smile, "but witches don't carry money."

"How about a calendar?" I asked at last, completely out of ideas. "I know a team that did a calendar and made oodles of money. Maybe we could even make enough to cover the national competition, too, since we don't have to cover transportation and lodging fees."

I'd thrown it out there in desperation. But the change in the room was . . . amazing.

Tara frowned. "We'd be in the calendar?"

I nodded. "I could take the pictures with my cell phone camera." Well, I could if I got it back from Samuel. He collected kewl mortal gadgets. But he wouldn't stand in the way of my last chance to reverse my dive into social suicide, would he? Not Samuel.

"I'm in." Tara was not only in, she was glowing. I couldn't help but wonder what secret dream I'd tapped with the calendar suggestion. Maybe I shouldn't have counted the head shot idea out so quickly—although we didn't have any agent dads at Agatha's . . . that I knew of.

Tara stepped forward. "I'll design the calendar, Coach."

"Great, Tara. I'm sure Pru will appreciate all the help she can get."

Right. Sigh. It was going to be a hard year. And Tara was going to get all the credit. Except not for the fund-raiser. Nope. I was going to be the best fund-raiser any school has ever seen. And everyone was going to know it.

Besides, I could already see a way to make the volunteer work Angelo's mom had dragged me into turn into a fund-raising gold mine. Give me lemons, I make lemonade!

Being a witch made for an easier time creating a calendar, I have to say. I'd gotten the camera phone back from Samuel, and by the end of the next day's practice we had twelve rocking pictures for the inside months. We still needed a

picture for the cover. It had to be spectacular, so we weren't going to take just anything. Sixteen girls agreeing on one great picture was going to take some time.

"You girls are doing a wonderful job here, Prudence," Coach told me. "I am certain we're going to make the deadline to register with this calendar as our fund-raiser."

"It's going to sell like BOTOX injections just before a high school reunion," I agreed. I didn't mention who it was going to sell to, because Coach didn't ask. Neither had anyone else on the project. I was letting them enjoy the creative process. Selling the beautiful calendars we'd created was going to be much tougher.

"I've been meaning to give you these rules," Coach said, summoning a scroll from nowhere, "to help you guide the girls on their competitive moves."

"Thanks." I took it with a smile and went into a corner of the gym to read it over.

Rules for Competing with Mortals

1. Use no magic that takes advantage of natural mortal inferiority.
2. In any mortal competition, all magical enhancement of skills and advantages is strictly forbidden, unless necessary to save life and/or limb.
3. Memory-erasing charms are to be used only by those authorized and carrying the appropriate permit with an official council seal.

4. The penalty for any witch discovered cheating by use of magic in a mortal competition will be, up to and including, a time-reversal and forfeiture of contest prize and a subsequent reliving of the time from the end of the improperly won contest until the time the indiscretion is discovered.
5. Accidental use of magic during competition will not be punished if culprit immediately resigns from further competition.

I guess, because I had been appointed queen of fundraising, Coach thought I should be careful not to think I could just cast a throw me money, now spell in case the calendar idea was a dud. Little did she know my skills weren't quite up to that challenge.

I have to say, throwing in the towel on the competition was starting to look more and more tempting. Our team was going to look like idiots out there if I couldn't convince the girls to start shaping up. And none of them were inclined to think a witch who thought like a mortal had anything to offer them. I'd shown them the difference between sharp moves and sloppy moves until I was cheering in my sleep. But nothing was getting through to them.

I couldn't give up. That would be like a B-list star refusing a role in an A-list movie because he'd gotten a bad review in his most recent flop. Failure is best viewed from the rearview mirror, then forgotten. But these days, there was no enthusiasm in my practice leadership smile. As I

launched into my latest pep talk with the dirt shufflers, I could tell things weren't going well. But I had no idea how far off track I'd gotten until I used the phrase that always whipped my former team into form: "Remember, people, there is no I in team!"

They blinked at me, unimpressed. Which wasn't great, but I could work with it. At least, I thought I could, until Tara said, "But there is an I in witch."

Everyone dissolved in giggles. And the practice became even worse than the free-for-all it usually was.

Since I wasn't head cheerleader, I went into a corner, cast a spell to keep clumsy flyers out of it, and popped myself a Mae-Flyer. Stretching always put me into a Zen state, which I seriously needed right now. Not that stretching to maintain perfect form would make any difference if I was the only one who bothered. Even a perfect dancer would look awkward in a chorus line that was off beat.

I was tired of fighting the girls. Tired of fighting Tara. It was a war that was never won, no matter how many battles went my way. There was only one way to win the war and that was to get Tara fighting on my side. Easier said than done, for sure. What could you get for the cheerleader who has everything, including a wicked grasp on magic? And would it be enough to make her see that it would serve her interests to buy into the "mortal" idea of cheerleading teamwork?

I was shocked when Tara stepped through my defense

zone. It was almost as if I'd asked the question aloud. "What's that?" She pointed to my Mae-Flyer.

"It's called a Mae-Flyer. It helps me get just the right lift in my hip." I tried to demonstrate, lifting into the air in perfect form. But I didn't go anywhere. Duh. I muttered a chant under my breath to dissolve the defense bubble away and then rose in the air.

"Kewl. Can I try?"

Pretty sure it wouldn't really be that simple, I handed over the Mae-Flyer and showed her how to use it.

She didn't quite get the hang of it, so I tried to give her pointers. "You want your standing leg straight, and a perfect ninety-degree bend here." I tried to get her hip in the right place, but she wasn't very flexible.

Since the mirrors I had asked Coach for still hadn't materialized, I popped a mirror in midair. "See? I did the pose properly between Tara and the mirror. It was clear where she was off. It was also clear, from the reflection of her expression, that she didn't like it.

She hauled on the Mae-Flyer strap, pulling her hip into perfect position—for about a half a second. Then she let go. "Ouch! That's hard!" She rubbed her hip.

"The cramp will go away if you stretch beforehand and practice every day." I saw a chance to do my bit for team sync with Tara—and the rest of the squad, all watching us with gossip-girl interest, even if they were pretending they weren't.

Tara sent one of those “for my ears only” whispers my way. “This whole ‘mortal slipup’ stuff could be kewl, you know.”

“It could?” Samual had taught me the quiet whisper trick, so I used it. I was looking for the other shoe, not wanting it to drop on my head. “How?”

“I can make it kewl.”

I thought about it for about a millisecond. Yep, she could. But I wasn’t born on the back lot of a fantasy world. “That would be quite a favor. I’d owe you.”

“Don’t be silly. It’s no big deal.” She really did have the perfect cheerleader smile when she was lying. “I wouldn’t want anyone laughing at you, me, and Angelo when we’re out for a drive in that car of yours. You’re one of my best buds.”

“*Angelo?*” She wanted me to hook her up with my mortal neighbor? How many ways could I get into trouble for that one? Not to mention that crush-poaching made my teeth grind.

“You don’t like him, do you?” She put her hands to her heart as if she cared about stealing a guy from me.

“Are you kidding? I’ve sworn off mortal stuff completely, even guys,” I lied.

“Great!”

Yeah, great. There may be no I in team, but there is one in witch, and maybe, just maybe, there was no way to reconcile the two realities.



Chapter 17



Angelo was busy edging our pathway when Samuel popped by for a tutoring session. I was busy watching Angelo through the window—which I quickly charmed to hide the interior from any curious glances.

“If you’re so worried that he’ll see you, why don’t you tell your mom to fire him?” Samuel asked.

I thought about trying to explain that my family had perfected the whole nosy mortal neighbor shtick back in Beverly Hills. That it was easier to keep them unsuspecting. But he was glaring at Angelo like he was going to do the firing himself, so I opted for a strategy of total distraction. “Agatha’s going to let me test out early.”

He stopped looking at the window, and while he was

looking away, I double-charmed it so that Angelo couldn't see us and we couldn't see him. I'd miss the eye candy, but I didn't have the energy for a jealous snit when I had to throw my magical education into mega-overdrive. "When is it? Maybe we can double up on tutoring sessions." He looked a little panicked, which wasn't reassuring.

"Mom's checking with Agatha to find out." I tried to sound upbeat, despite the fact the whole thing made me feel like barfing. "She hasn't said, so far. Probably the worst possible time, just because she hates me and my mortal ways."

Predictably, he immediately tried to prop me up. "You're doing much better. Should I make the ring buzz a little stronger?"

"A little." I'd told him about the pizza fiasco. He'd made me promise to pay attention to the ring sooner rather than later. "And Mom has a call in to Cousin Seamus for an emergency session."

"Don't let a few shallow cheerleaders take your confidence away, Prudence. You'll start thinking like a witch soon. You'll manifest a Talent. You'll be a great witch, I know it."

"You know you're talking to one of those *shallow* cheerleaders, right?" I couldn't let that diss slide—even if it came from a clueless geeklock.

"You're not shallow." He believed that. I wasn't so sure. He hadn't yet called me on the fact that Maria and Denise hadn't been invited to the sleepover, but I was waiting for

him to ask me to stand up and defend my friendship with the fringies. It was just his way. Sometimes I liked that about him and sometimes I didn't.

Instead of knocking me for D-listing Maria and Denise, he went for a totally unexpected target. "You just like the bad boys too much. Like Daniel . . ." He turned to the window, and my double charm fell away to reveal Angelo, now trimming the branches of an apple tree. "That Angelo kid is going to get you in trouble, you know? You should probably stay away from mortals for a while." Samuel tried to be casual about his statement, as if he had no personal reason for me to pretend Angelo didn't exist.

"Maybe I want to be in trouble." I probably shouldn't have been flip, but I don't like bossy guys, and Samuel being jealous of Angelo was a problem I had to solve right away. As much of a geek as Samuel was, I couldn't imagine life without him.

"Aren't you in enough trouble as it is, just trying to learn what you need to know to pass that test?"

That was so not fair. "Angelo cuts our lawn. He trims our trees. He's mortal. Big deal. What do you want from me? You like that I'm half mortal. That's why you wanted to be friends with me in the first place." Which may have been a little harsh. But hey, he was a fringie and I had a sick feeling he was about to make me choose: him or Angelo.

"Sometimes I wonder if we really are friends." Samuel

didn't look at me when he said that. Which meant he really did wonder if I was using him or not.

"We are. If I didn't have you, I would have run away weeks ago. I mean, Agatha hates me, I'm not a good witch, and I'm not even doing well as a cheerleader." I smiled at him, hoping that a little reassurance was all he needed.

"Then why are you watching Angelo do yard work when you should be studying for your test?"

"I can look at Angelo and memorize potion ingredients at the same time." Well, no, I couldn't. But a little break every now and then made the mind sharper, or so my dad always said.

Samuel flipped his glasses at me once, then sighed. He didn't believe me, but he didn't say so. Wise of him. After all, what's a little foggy gray truth between friends?

He flipped the funny lenses of his glasses one more time, though, just so I would know he was onto my lie. For some reason that just irritated me beyond temptation. "Now that I don't live in Beverly Hills, I have to embrace my inner witch fully. Mom would never let me date a mortal. I'm surprised she even lets me cheer at mortal games. I bet she hopes we suck at the Regionals, too."

He seemed surprised at my bitterness. "She's right, Pru. The last thing you need is a mortal friend when you have to practice your magic 24/7." I forgot that he liked my mom. And that he didn't have one.

I couldn't help defending myself, though. "We haven't had any trouble with our study sessions. We've been able to keep everything from him."

Like a woman fighting for the last Ferragamo, Samuel refused to let it go. "Maybe you would already know all the most common potion ingredients and their benefits if—"

Bzzt! Off-limits. "Whoa! That's just unfair. It's not like I invite him over. My mom is the one who hired him for yard work."

He could tell I was upset, so he tried to back down. "Why did she do that, anyway? She could just set a few yard spells—or, better yet, let you practice some."

I wasn't going to let him diss Angelo, though. "Sure, if Angelo's mother weren't so nosy."

"She is bad." Samuel had seen her in action the day she'd managed to get Angelo invited to my party, so he knew I wasn't exaggerating. But it wasn't enough to make him give up dogging on me. "You should talk to your mom. Explain how he makes your magic practice harder. Or do you want me to do it? I'm sure she'd understand why you can't have any mortals around while you're working so hard on your magic. It interferes—"

We had wasted too much time on this. I decided it was time to end it. "Sounds good. Why don't you tell her to kick my dad out, too, since he's mortal?"

But no matter how many times I tried to distract him, Samuel kept coming back to the main point. Angelo. "Your

dad knows about you. You don't plan to tell Angelo you're a witch, do you?"

"*Tell* Angelo?" I'm not sure what paranoid brain fart made him think I'd tell Angelo I was a witch. Like I needed that headache? "Don't worry. I'm not going to tell him a thing."

Samuel was not happy with my reassurances. And it had nothing to do with Angelo seeing me do magic and everything to do with the fact I liked watching Angelo do his yard work. "Well, if you're going to keep letting him come over, maybe I should stop tutoring you."

"Are you serious?" I really hated being bullied. Especially by a friend. Especially because my friend was jealous—not that he had any right to be. One, he was not my boyfriend, and two, neither was Angelo. And neither were likely to have that honor the way my life has been going either.

"Absolutely. I'm not coming over when he's over here." He crossed his arms, and I realized we'd just hit an impasse. Right before my test. Figured. "He could catch us doing magic, and I don't want that."

"Well, fine then. I'll just find someone else to tutor me," I crossed my arms, ignoring the bracelet sounding the alarm at my wrist.

"Fine." Samuel didn't back down. In fact, he looked crushed.

"Fine."

He muttered angrily, "Maybe you're more like your mom than you thought you were."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I knew what it was supposed to mean—that I should stop seeing Angelo if I didn't want to end up married to a mortal and making my life even more complicated than it already was.

"Nothing." The bracelet on my wrist told me that was a lie. Which he confirmed by muttering, "Maybe you should forget the test and go back and live with mortals if you love being kewl so much."

I knew it was a waste of time to defend the kewl to a fringie. But I did it, anyway. "There's nothing wrong with being kewl."

"What's so right about it, then?"

I didn't have an answer for him, but it didn't matter because he was so angry, he just popped out on me without a split-second's warning. I guess even geeks have their breaking point.

But then, so did I. And I was closer than I liked to think.

I had the biggest test of my life to pass, a fund-raiser to take care of, and championships to win. All while I had one witch hand tied behind my back with a mortal rope.

I wished I could count on the girls to help me sort this mess out. I could have counted on the Beverly Hills crew. Even Chezzie, who hated me, would have put aside her prejudices to offer me good advice on boy trouble. That's the way we were. The way we had been. And that was gone.

I would've asked Maria and Denise, but they weren't talking to me because I hadn't invited them to the sleepover

portion of the party. I'd tried to explain that they'd have hated a sleepover with cheerleaders, but I could see it didn't matter. Now that Samuel and I were fighting, they'd have even less reason to talk to me.

I didn't want to lose Samuel as a friend. The thought made my chest ache. But what could I do? The truth was, I'd only sat at the lunch table with Samuel, Maria, and Denise because the only other choice was not to eat lunch. I'd meant to use them as a means to the cheerleaders' table. And yes, I know that sounds shallow. But sometimes survival *is* shallow.

It had seemed simple enough at the time. But clearly I was looking through the eyes of a golden girl. I'd been in the in crowd since preschool back in Beverly Hills. I'd seen the fringe crowd, and I'm no snob, I'd say hi and share notes if asked. But friendships seemed as unlikely as the proverbial lion laying down with the lamb.

Who knew I'd like these fringies? Samuel the geek with the loyally golden heart, Maria the sweetheart with attitude, and Denise, the sharp mind hiding under layers of wool and tweed. They were my friends now. Not that the other cheerleaders really understood that. They were like I had been. I'd have to change that, but at the moment, I was still on probation with the team members.

So. Juggling needed to be done. I just wish I wasn't feeling so tired that I didn't think I could handle adding another double-edged sword to my already-full juggling schedule.



Chapter 18



Despite the Grand Canyon divide between Samuel and me, and the upcoming test I didn't have a study buddy for, life on the cheerleading front was sweet. The calendar idea had all the girls dreaming they'd be the next *Witch Vogue* find. Somehow, creating a calendar had bonded us in a way that actual practice and cheering at games hadn't. Go figure.

We'd decided on a cover picture. For a little while, I'd been sure we were actually going to kill each other and go up in a big puff of smoke. But, somehow, we managed to find the one pose where everyone looked great and the squad looked like a real team—for once.

We'd done such a good job bonding over photo ops and flattering camera angles that Tara had her claws in the retract

position almost all the time. But her long-term memory was still as sharp as ever. “So, when are we going for that ride, Pru?”

“Angelo’s mother keeps him on a leash with a choke collar,” I stalled. I don’t know why I felt so proprietary toward Angelo. Maybe because he was off-limits to me and I didn’t really like the idea that the same rule didn’t apply to Tara. Or maybe it was just that I didn’t think that Angelo and Tara would make a good couple.

Whatever it was, I felt like I’d been stuck in a wringer with no place to go but ouch. I knew what Tara wanted me to do, and I knew I didn’t want to do it. Just like I knew I was going to have to do it whether I wanted to or not. That’s what squad sisters do. Even when it’s a total bummer.

Tara shrugged. “If his mom’s a problem, I could cast a look the other way spell on her.”

“That’s against the rules,” I pointed out.

“Since when are you a go-by-the-rules girl? Remember Daniel? You broke rules for him.” She grinned. “I’d definitely break rules for Angelo. *Yummy*.”

“He is cute,” I agreed. “For a mortal.”

“So when are you going to hook us up?”

I let it hang there for a moment, hoping one of the other girls—who seemed to be hanging on to every word Tara and I uttered—would pick up on the problem. Finally Elektra piped up: “Will your parents let you date a mortal, Tara? Mine would freak.”

A few others nodded, but not with shock, just that aura of delight when someone else asked a question you were dying to ask. Which was when it dawned on me that there was more than one person interested in Angelo. I guess Angelo had that effect on girls, be they witch or mortal.

But Tara just laughed. "I don't tell my parents everything. Do you?"

"No." Elektra doesn't know a rhetorical question from a pop quiz. Fortunately, she doesn't know when to drop a subject, either. "But I can't imagine that they wouldn't find out. They found out when I took that little side trip to Sundance."

"You went to Sundance?" I leaned forward and pretended to be even more eager to hear about her trip than I actually was.

Elektra grinned. "I heard the buzz about this little film about witches and I couldn't resist."

"Was it any good?" Several people asked the question in unison. It was a perennial annoyance how mortals could be so certain magic didn't really exist, and yet so persistent in writing stories in which they got everything all wrong.

"Of course not," Elektra scoffed. "They did the broom thing, but actually tried to spice it up a bit by substituting vacuum cleaners."

Everyone groaned, and Tara chimed in with one of her trademark snarky comments. "How long were the electrical cords? Don't mortals ever follow the logic?"

I was just about to relax, thinking that I'd effectively maneuvered past having to deliver Angelo to Tara on a sterling silver platter. But then she turned back to me. "Of course, some of them are cute enough that it doesn't matter."

Sigh. But the conversation had given me a way to look like I was cooperating and still get more than I was giving up.

"Well, I don't know. His mom is more protective than witch parents. But maybe she'd let him go out with you if you won her heart by volunteering at Old Salem Village on Halloween."

"Talk about not getting it right," Tara said, rolling her eyes.

"To be fair, it's about mortals, not witches. It was mostly mortals who got arrested and tried. And it's kind of neat to see how our parents lived, too," I pointed out.

Tara frowned. "My mother was definitely not raised in Salem. She was born in London." This was, I had learned, an even more sore spot with witches than mortals.

Maybe it's because I was raised in Beverly Hills, where pedigree was more about paycheck and Hollywood A-list, but I couldn't work up any steam to care about who was born where, when. Not that I'd say so to Tara. Rumor had it she'd gotten another girl kicked off the team for daring to speak her mind on this subject.

"Why would I want to waste my time with mortals?" she asked.

"Not just mortals—a whole day with Angelo."

"Not alone, though," Tara objected.

I hated to do it, but it would dial me up to faux friend in Tara's address book, which would make team cooperation a lock. "He and I are supposed to play a young couple, so you'd get to play house with him. You can't tell me you wouldn't think that was fun? Besides, who knows where it would lead?"

"True." Tara nodded. "And if I was bored, I could just leave."

"I wouldn't get bored with Angelo," Celestina whispered, and she turned bright red when we all turned to look at her. Tara did not look happy.

Uh-oh. Was there going to be a catfight?

Charity shouldered in to protect her main girl's stake on her chosen guy. "Hey, if you like him, let me know and I'll make sure he asks you out. There's this little spell I know—"

Elektra shook her head. "*Then* you'd have to tell your parents."

Tara did a little hair flip, the polite girl's version of "get lost." "That's what you think."

Everyone giggled. Except me. I wasn't happy that it was Angelo hunting season.

If only Daniel would stop playing games and come back. I could use a little distraction from all this Angelo/mortal stuff. Daniel might be trouble, but at least he was a witch.



Chapter 19



After all my hot and heavy efforts to test out of remedial magic classes, I found myself with feet so cold, I practically had toesicles. The more I learned, the more I learned I didn't know. I felt like that Greek guy who kept rolling the boulder up the hill every day and watching it roll down every night. Sisyphus, I think Mr. Dooley said his name was.

When we got the summons from Agatha, I wondered—briefly, before I replaced the terrible thought with some pepilicious up-talk—if it was possible that Agatha might have actually known some of those cranky Greek gods and goddesses.

I was right to worry. After Mom pestered her for a date,

Agatha abruptly sent an appointment notice for us—leaving us barely five minutes to get ready before she scrapped the whole idea. So we showed up.

Agatha barely looked at my mother. She saved all her icy disdain for me. “Mr. Phogg has agreed to test you on October thirty-first. Midnight sharp.”

“Halloween?” But I was supposed to volunteer all day. Not to mention sell the fund-raising calendars we’d made.

Agatha seemed more than a little pleased that I was unhappy enough to show her I didn’t like the short lead time. “It seems fitting that we test you, raised in the mortal world, on the day the mortals mock us and the whole idea of magic.”

“It isn’t mockery, exactly.” I thought guiltily of all the ugly, pointy-nosed, and warty witches I’d seen trick or treating. I’d never wanted to be one, but I hadn’t stood up for witches either. I’d just gone for fairy princess, ballet dancer, and cheerleader and not said a word to anyone who might put on green makeup and a hairy wart. Of course, I’d noticed in the last few years that there were more Harry Potter-type witches and fewer Wicked Witches of the West. I suppose you could call that progress.

Agatha sighed frostily. “You may perhaps remember that I am not the one who has been living solely in the mortal world for the last sixteen years. I think I know a little more about mockery than you do.”

I decided it was best to play the model student, although I doubt my meek little act fooled anyone in the room. “Of course, Headmistress.”

She smiled, and I swear an icy chill went down my back. “Good. I shall tell Mr. Phogg to expect you at midnight on the dot, then.”

And with that, the meeting was over. I don’t know where Agatha sent Mom, but I popped back into the school hallway with enough time to make practice without any late penalty.

As it turned out, Mom wasn’t any happier about the date than I was. But when I got home after practice, she didn’t even suggest that we fight Agatha. We both knew well enough that would only cause more trouble.

However, she did give me her most sympathetic smile. “I’ll track down Cousin Seamus right away. And you don’t have to worry about babysitting to pay your car insurance. Your dad and I will take care of it until you’ve passed this test.”

I wanted to cry. Because Mom was taking care of me and I didn’t know if it was because she knew I could pass the test with the extra help, or because she was afraid I wouldn’t no matter what.

I knew how I felt. Uncertain. And that was scary. I’ve been positive I could meet any challenge thrown at me as long as I can remember. I wasn’t afraid of hard work, and I

wasn't particularly dumb. But when it came to doing magic, I wasn't sure I had the street cred to get me through.

Dad was funny about it. At dinner, after Mom had told him about the test date, he asked, "Would you like help quizzing up on your potion ingredients, spells, chants, charms, and incantations? I could do like I used to do with spelling words and history facts."

I wanted to cry. "Thanks, Dad. That would be great." Useless, but great to know he wanted me to succeed. Success was one of those words that had dropped out of my vocabulary after I moved to Salem. I really missed the old days, when "Prudence Stewart" was listed as an example of the definition.

Fortunately, Mom finally dragged Cousin Seamus from wherever he'd been. He was a Magic Talent. Gifted—but flaky. He was my only chance now that Samuel wasn't talking to me.

"So Old Agatha gave you the test date from hell, huh?" Cousin Seamus didn't seem to think it was as awful as I did. But then, he didn't have to take the test himself. And even if he did, he could have passed it without blinking.

"She hates me." I expected him to disagree and reassure, like most adults would have.

But that wasn't Seamus's way. "You're not the first student Old Agatha has hated, and I'm sure you won't be the last."

“What happened to the other students she hated?” I wasn’t sure I wanted to know, but the question squirted out before I could stop it.

He stopped smiling. “Well, mostly they escape without permanent scars. Although there have been rumors—”

“Seamus!” Mom was not amused.

“What? Don’t you remember—”

“There is no time to talk about the past. Prudence needs to study for the test. Now.”

“A little history—”

“Will not help her pass the test, will it?”

Even Seamus had to concede my mom was right on that score. Finding out your headmistress/enemy has eaten others for breakfast is not the most confidence-inducing information ever. Maybe that was why the butterflies in my stomach had begun to turn into something more along the lines of tiny, fluttering porcupines.

Mom was in full-on commando mode. “Her spell work is her strongest magic, so don’t waste time with that,” she instructed Seamus. “I think you’ll do best if you work on potions, transfiguration, dimensional transportation, and perhaps, if you have time left, she could use some drill work on her summoning, to strengthen her simultaneous control over multiple objects. But if not, her father can help with the drill work.”

Seamus saluted. “Yes, *mon capitaine*.”

"Seamus, this is serious. Agatha isn't going to make this test easy for her."

"Well, kiddo, it isn't the end of the world if you fail."

Ummm. Hello? It is the end of the world as I know it. As much as Coach Gertie loved my insider knowledge about the competitions, she wasn't going to make a remedial student head cheerleader. It just wasn't the cheerleader way.

I hadn't thought it would be so hard to make a place for myself among the kewl kids at Agatha's. I mean, in Beverly Hills I had it going on (and I don't say that with a big head). At Agatha's, I had to hang on to everything that was kewl with clenched teeth.

Although, a question Samuel asked me has been rattling around in my head: "What does it matter if you're kewl?" It used to matter because the kewl kids were the ones who got what they wanted, from a car on their sixteenth birthday to a full-ticket ride to the college of their choice (which, as we've been told since kindergarden, is the only way to have the life we want). I wanted to be—*had* wanted to be—a pediatrician. But did I anymore? I didn't know. I didn't even know what my options were. Partly it depended on what Talent I manifested. So I was like all those kids I knew back in Beverly Hills who just wanted to pass their classes and move on to the next year, and the next, until they graduated and escaped. I'd never understood them before. I was a goal-oriented kind of girl. But now . . . the only thing I knew

for sure was that I didn't want to find out I could have had what I wanted if I'd kept my kewl status at Agatha's until I had a clue about how things worked in the witch world.

The one clue I did have? I needed to get out of remedial magic class. And so maybe I was a little too enthusiastic about seeing Cousin Seamus and his electronic friend Toot. They'd helped me out already once before, and I was so glad the cavalry had arrived, I hugged and kissed Seamus on both cheeks. Twice. "Now that you're here, I don't have to worry about failing."

He laughed, but his cheeks were a little pink. I don't think he gets mauled by females much. Oh, well. I said, "Sorry about that, but you and Toot are the only ones who can slow down time enough to help me learn what I need to know before the test."

Seamus saluted me sloppily. "Aye-aye, me lovely. Toot, let's set the time to winter molasses and get started. Miss Pru has a deadline to beat."



Chapter 20



The morning of October 31 dawned cold and raw. Perfect for my mood. I'd been studying in quadruple time with Cousin Seamus, but there was no way to explain that to Angelo or his mother, so I was still on the hook for my volunteer work at Old Salem Village. Picture me, as tired as a B-movie actress who'd just finished her twentieth "run down the hall and scream at the top of your lungs" take. I was dressed in costume and trying to look, if not thrilled, then at least awake.

"Ready?" Angelo came to the door to pick Mom and me up. That woke me up. He was dressed in Puritan black. You'd think he'd look dorky, considering he was better known for a tight T-shirt and jeans look. But you'd be

wrong. Three hundred years ago, those lady Puritans would have been flapping their skirts at him. I bet the real Puritans would have clapped him in the stocks for turning the women's heads to thoughts of fun and games. Apparently they weren't too big on anything other than work and prayer, plus persecuting witches every now and again, of course.

"Is anybody ever ready for this much fun?" I smiled, so he'd know I was joking.

"You look great." The way his eyes twinkled, I could almost believe he meant it.

But then I remembered how I'd looked in the hall mirror. My hair was barely visible under my tight white cap, and my wool gown was unlined and very itchy. I'd put nylons on, even though woolen stockings would have been more proper. But because no one would see anything under the dress, I refused the final authenticity—which would have left my legs with a rash for the rest of the week, no doubt.

"Don't you make a handsome couple." Mrs. Kenton came up the walk, hurrying a little, no doubt to protect her precious, innocent Angelo from Pru the Puritan hussy. I don't know why she was so eager to push him on us on the one hand and keep him from any of the natural boy-girl stuff on the other. Too bad I couldn't explain why she didn't have to worry about me chasing after her son. Maybe she'd stop

seeing me as a threat when I pulled the Tara switch, which I hadn't clued Angelo in on yet—I didn't want his mother to go all diva and insist I follow her carefully laid plan.

"I've put you both in the Warner cottage." She handed us a thick folder of paper. "Here are your scripts. Remember that today you are a good Puritan couple." She said that with a warning look at me. As if I might decide that the Puritan idea of marrying young and living without running water or electricity was the lifestyle for me.

I looked at my script as we climbed into Mrs. Kenton's van for the quick trip to Old Salem Village. Make that the usually quick trip. The streets were jammed with people. Tourists, to be precise. They crossed the road without regard to traffic, turned away from oncoming cars and pointed, and just generally made life slow down to an excruciating crawl. I didn't bother to try to remember the script. I hoped Tara would take things seriously enough to read it, at least. But I didn't want to think about Tara and Angelo working the Warner cottage together.

The only upside to this whole volunteer gig was that we would be fund-raising to a packed house. Our calendars would be seen by thousands. Go, Pru.

I'd convinced Mrs. Kenton that the Witches could dress as witches and set up a small table to sell our cheerleading calendars. I told her it would be cute. She frowned.

I told her the headmistress of Agatha's would be in her

debt. She agreed to the table. She wasn't happy about it, but she agreed. And she gave me a look that asked whether or not I knew I was blackmailing her, in effect. I just gave her an innocent smile.

When we arrived, the team was waiting next to a pile of boxes. Even though all the girls were dressed like Puritans, they looked happy and cheerful—which meant nothing at all, because they were cheerleaders and we had a calendar to push on unsuspecting tourists. The plan was for the whole team to take turns manning the table and volunteering at Old Salem Village.

I managed the Tara-for-me switch without Mrs. Kenton noticing. I had prepared a don't notice spell, but it wasn't necessary because the minute she stepped out of her van, twenty-five frantic women needed her immediate attention. I thought Angelo looked a little like a sad puppy dog as Tara happily dragged him away without looking at the script I'd shoved in her hand.

I started opening boxes and stacking calendars in as attractive a display as I could manage without being able to use magic. Our calendars were really spectacular, if I do say so myself. The pictures had come out well. And a little bit of magic was tons better than Photoshop any day.

"This was a wonderful idea, Pru." Mom came by in costume. "Everyone is talking about how well you girls did with the calendar and the 'special effects.' Not to mention

the fact that you avoided exploiting the sexiness factor and were tasteful.”

“Tasteful was Coach Gertie’s idea.” We’d been worried we’d lose sales without lower necklines and bare midriffs. But the steady line of customers (not all male, either) convinced me that Coach Gertie had been right. The citizens and tourists of Salem were more interested in helping a wholesome cheerleading team get to competition than they were in seeing us skimpily dressed on every page.

“Wow, how did you get this shot?” a woman asked, pointing to the month of February, where we were flying over a big heart-shaped frame. It was delicate—we looked almost like cherubs in cheerleader uniforms, lightly wafting around the heart shape, smiling, posing gracefully and against the rules of mortal physics.

“The magic of photography,” I said.

Not to mention the magic of salesmanship. We sold out of all the calendars without any hint of magic (Coach and Mom had both put magic damping spells on our booth). Except for the magic of making your dream come true.

When we counted up our earnings and realized we had enough to go to Regionals, plus a little left over for Nationals, we were buzzed. For once, it felt good to have managed to be entirely successful at Agatha’s.

Until Coach Gertie started to stuff the cash and checks

into the envelope with our Regionals application.

“You can’t just put those in there,” I explained. “You have to put them in your bank and then write a check to the competition.”

“A check?” The look on her face said it all. Checks in witch world were as useful as cash. In other words—not at all necessary.

Great. For a second I thought all was lost, and then I remembered that my dad had a checking account. He hadn’t loved the calendar idea, so I’d been keeping it on the down low around him. But this was an emergency. He had to help, even if I had to beg.

When I asked him that evening, he was going to say no at first—he thought selling calendars with our photos was pandering to the crowd who likes “underage cheesecake.” But Mom showed him the calendar, and he said, “You girls did a wonderful job on this!” He looked at my mom. “Wasn’t it risky for them to fly on camera?”

“Everyone knows all about Hollywood special effects.” My mom grinned at him.

He sighed. “Very well.” He went through the cash and receipts and totaled them up twice. “This is more than you need for Regionals, so I’ll keep track of the rest for your application fee to the national competition.”

“Thanks, Dad.” I hugged him. I couldn’t help it. I had two great parents, even if I didn’t always want to admit it. I bet

they'd even love me if I didn't pass this test. Unfortunately, *I* would disown me.

As I changed out my prehistoric getup for something comfortable and cute and testworthy, I decided I was glad I'd set Angelo up with Tara. Now that I was in a witch school, I just couldn't afford to juggle magic *and* a mortal boyfriend. Too much trouble. Too much potential for disaster. Mom was right. Ever since Daniel disappeared, I'd started to notice there were dozens of cute boys at school who not only knew I was a witch, but shared the magic genes. A whole lotta explanatory small talk no longer needed.

I popped downstairs to say good-bye to my parents.

"You're a star, sweetie," my dad said as I stood waiting for the stroke of midnight. "Knock 'em dead."

"Thanks, Dad."

I knew he was telling the truth when he told me I had nothing to worry about. My bracelet didn't tingle at all.

Not until Mom chimed in with, "We have complete faith in you, honey. You're going to be out of remedial classes tomorrow, I'm sure."

Right, Mom. Then why is my bracelet tingling so hard, my fingers are numb? Sigh. Maybe I should take an unscheduled field trip back to Old Salem Village—three hundred years ago. The simple life of churning butter and cooking in a big pot over an open flame. A simple life for a girl who can only manage simple magic.



Chapter 21



I expected the testing room to be the same as it was when I first tested into Agatha's—blinding white walls, floor and ceiling that blended together. But it turned out to be Mr. Phogg's regular classroom, chalkboard and all.

Things started out simply enough. Mr. Phogg sent me to the board, gave me a spell, and asked me to spot what was wrong and fix it.

I stared at the spell, wondering if it was okay to say it aloud. I decided not to risk it. I had a feeling I needed all the points I could get in order to pass.

Let's see. This spell was meant to spiff up the student brain right before a test. Subtle, Mr. Phogg, subtle.

Words and nuance,
Dates and facts,
Fire my neurons,
Snap my synapses.

Hmmmm. Okay. Words matter. Dates matter. Facts matter. The brain has neurons and synapses. Sounded good to me. So, even though it was simple, I was already stumped. Great.

The only word that didn't seem to belong was "nuance." It meant shades of meaning, though, which could matter in a test. Or, duh, it does, obviously, since I'm supposed to change the one wrong word to the right word in order to make this spell work. Sigh. As far as I could tell, this spell should work.

I suppose it could be a trick question, but Mr. Phogg hasn't thrown me a trick question since the first day of class, so I doubted it.

Okay. Back to the spell on the board. How's the rhyme scheme? I know that matters.

Words and nuance,
Dates and facts,
Fire my neurons,
Snap my synapses.

Nuance and neurons have a certain symmetry, even though they don't rhyme exactly. Facts and synapses, not so

much. Facts and synapse would rhyme well. But snapping one synapse wouldn't make sense. Hmmm.

Mr. Phogg was watching me patiently. I didn't notice him checking his watch, so I had a shred of hope that time was not important. Of course, I didn't really want to take a year to pass the test. That seemed slightly counterproductive to me.

How about . . . ?

I looked at Mr. Phogg. And then, with my best cheerleader lilt, I said,

"Words and nuance,
Dates and facts,
Fire my neurons,
Snap each synapse."

I felt pretty confident, but not confident enough to end with a double wave "Yay!"

Mr. Phogg stared at me for a little longer than I liked. But then the spell erased itself off the board and a new one took its place.

I felt pretty comfortable with the spell portion of the test. Samuel said I was good at it, probably because of all my years of writing and practicing cheers.

I was just starting to think I might be able to pass this thing when Mr. Phogg changed it up on me. "Miss Stewart, it's time for potions."

I braced myself, prepared to be asked to make some cream or ointment that would clear the skin or improve short-term memory. But, no. Instead, a long oak table appeared in front of me. On it were small white ceramic bowls. Each bowl contained something. My stomach started to hurt. I was going to have to identify and name what looked like . . . forty . . . potion ingredients.

I tried not to show Mr. Phogg how nervous I was. I went to the first bowl and quickly wrote down eye of newt. That was easy. Unfortunately, it was the only easy one of the forty.

The problem with potion ingredients was that there were so many that looked alike. You had to smell it, feel the texture, sometimes taste it—although if you taste the wrong ingredient, it could be dangerous.

I thought about quitting. I had no idea what more than half of these things could be. There were four good candidates for hair of beetle, for example.

But quitting wasn't an option. I would just have to hope I would have luck on my side for once since I'd landed in Salem. I took the same strategy I used with the SATs: Trust my instincts, answer the question, and move on to the next.

Mr. Phogg didn't help things either. He kept hovering, watching me. He didn't say anything, but every so often he would twitch, or sigh, or sniff. None of it seemed like approval, and my nerves were fried by the time I'd guessed at the last potion ingredients and we moved on to transfiguration.

At least turning one object into another and back again was something I had immediate feedback on. For example, I knew the rock I turned into a rabbit actually turned into a gerbil. Points off for sure. But the gerbil turned back into a rock, so I earned partial credit for that problem.

I think I passed transfiguration. I think. I made some mistakes, but I did quite a bit right. Sure, the black rabbit was white when I re-zapped it to its original form. But it was a rabbit. That had to count for most of the points. Right?

Besides potions, it was summoning that really tripped me up. I'd improved a lot. I could summon more than one object. I could summon things from more than one place at the same time. I almost never dropped anything I summoned either. But my fine-motor summoning was still at the kindergarten stage.

So when Mr. Phogg zapped a pile of brightly colored LEGOs on the table in front of me and asked me to build a castle, I started to shake. But I did it. True, my castle looked like a big chunk had been taken out of it by a tornado. But I did it all with magic. Look, Agatha! No hands!

I could document all the disasters that I had to face during the test. But it would be too depressing. A three-hour witch test was more exhausting than two days of intensely acrobatic cheering tryouts. By the time I'd finished creating my last charm—a cute little locket that was supposed to

help someone keep focused on her goal—I was ready to do a Rip Van Winkle and sleep for a hundred years.

No such luck.

Mr. Phogg, looking sad—although he always looks sad—stood before me. “Thank you, Miss Stewart.”

“Did I pass?” I really didn’t want to know, but I knew I would want to know later. In about fifty years.

He didn’t look very encouraging. But, again, what was new with that? “I’ll take the results of the exam under advisement, discuss them with the headmistress, and let you know.”

“Can you give me a hint?” Crappiola times ten. I hadn’t thought about having to wait to find out whether I’d passed or not. “Did I nail it? Did I come close?”

He smiled. Skin and Bones smiled! “I’m afraid the details matter more than you realize, Miss Stewart. They will have to be carefully weighed. That is not a process to be done in the snap of one’s fingers.” He snapped his bony fingers, and I swear I saw a spark.

Okay. Waiting was necessary. I could do it. I could. But I was bummed. Majorly bummed.

Everything depended on whether or not I passed that test. Everything.

I couldn’t utter a word to Mom and Dad, who were sitting at the kitchen table waiting for me. I wrote “grade still pending” in glowing letters on the kitchen table. Then I popped directly to my room, cried, summoned Ben &

Jerry's ice cream, and ate it from the carton without a spoon. Then I cried some more. Then I went to sleep, wishing very much I'd wake up and find out the whole moving to Salem thing was a *really* bad nightmare.



Chapter 22



The next morning, the world was still the same as it had been. I'd taken the test, but it hadn't changed anything. Yet. My life was a nightmare, but not one I could wake up from. Worse, my fate was in the hands of Agatha. If she thought I hadn't passed, Mr. Phogg wouldn't argue. I'd be burnt toast with rancid grape jelly on top.

For the first time since I could remember, I had trouble putting on the cheerleader-confident smile I needed to face Mom and Dad at the breakfast table.

"Good morning, Pru. Would you like eggs or cereal?" Mom didn't seem upset, which I had expected. Although it didn't escape my notice that she had asked me what I wanted for breakfast when I was perfectly capable of popping it myself.

“So? Did you suck as bad as you thought you would?” Dorklock was, as always, as diplomatic as a buzz saw.

“I don’t know yet.” It was hard not to cry. “Mr. Phogg said he had to consult with Agatha before . . . before . . .” I couldn’t finish the sentence. Tears started trickling down my face.

Dad flipped out. Seriously.

He stood up, dropped his napkin on the table, and looked straight at my mom. “Prudence, say the word and we’ll go back to Beverly Hills. We won’t even wait to find out how you did on the test.” Apparently, seeing his baby girl hurt and devastated by a test when she’d never failed at anything in her life, was the last straw for him. Apparently, Dad had finally had it with witch world.

Mom didn’t get too upset. She took another bite of eggs before she responded. “You’re overreacting.”

But Dad was serious this time. “You’re underreacting.”

Mom put her fork down and took a sip of her coffee, as if we were discussing whether to have roast beef or salmon for dinner tonight. “You don’t have a job there anymore.”

“I could get it back.” Dad didn’t sound at all doubtful. “My old boss has called me for advice and told me so more than once.”

Mom looked surprised at that. “We said we’d give it a year. It hasn’t even been six months. Pru is settling into her school—”

"She's a wreck. Look at her."

Ouch. Did I look that bad that even Dad noticed? Maybe I *should* go back to Beverly Hills.

"She's tired from cramming, that's all. She and Seamus packed quite a few days' time into their study sessions. Besides, Prudence can handle it. She made the cheerleading squad, didn't she? She'll catch up."

"Catch up? She's always been the head of her class." Dad wasn't ready to calm down yet. "And Tobias? What is he learning in those Gifted and Talented classes of his?"

Mom stood up to meet Dad's eye. "He's learning how to be a responsible witch."

"There's an oxymoron if ever I heard one." Dad was really upset. He never attacked witchcraft like this—he knew it hurt Mom way too much.

"That's unfair."

"What was unfair was for us to take the kids out of the life they knew to come here. We need to go home," Dad said.

Mom and Dad didn't usually fight in front of us, so even the Dorklock and I were standing now. Frozen, staring, horrified. Wanting to run, but like rubberneckers on the L.A. Freeway, we were helpless to do anything but watch.

Dad turned to me. "Pru? Say the word and we're going home." If Dad had had any witch powers, he'd have used them right then and there to pop us back into our old life. If only he could pop us back to where we'd started from,

before all this Salem stuff started. Then Maddie wouldn't have had a chance to stab me in the back long-distance. And I'd be captain of the cheerleading squad—and acing every test I took.

Of course, Dad didn't have any powers, except to fume and rant. So if we went back, it would be in the yucky mortal way, where we had to go back and start rebuilding. No way would I be captain of the team again. And Maddie would be seeing Brent. And I'd have to see her, knowing we weren't ever going to be friends again. No thanks.

I looked at Mom and Dad. Fighting. Over me. I realized I was the only one who could end this before it got ugly. Maybe even way too ugly to fix. “Dad. Wait.”

“Pru, honey, it's okay. You don't need to be strong any longer. I told your mother we'd try this, but it isn't working.”

“Going back—”

He interrupted me. “I know it won't be exactly the same. We'll have to get a new house, but I promise we'll get one where you can go to your old school and hang out with your old friends. It will be just like we never moved.” I could see him trying to be the strong dad, protecting his baby.

It was sad to see him lying. And he was lying, my bracelet told me so. Although I think he was trying not to believe his words were lies. He really hated my school struggles worse than I did. And not because of that parent living through their child thing, but because he wanted me to feel

successful. To feel like I belonged. Maybe he knew because he knew what it felt like to be out of place in witch world. Big-time.

"It's okay, Dad." I put on my best "rally the crowd" face. "We should stay here. Not just for Tobias, but for me, too. I need to learn this witch stuff. I need to manifest my Talent and learn how to use it."

"You can do that on your own time, back in Beverly Hills, where you don't feel so out of place." He looked at Mom, and we all knew he meant what he said. My dad put his foot down often enough, but never like this. My mom can usually talk him around quickly enough that we don't have to worry. But that wasn't happening this time. Dad sounded more sure every time he said we were moving.

"Patience, you can teach them what they need to know," Dad said.

"I can," Mom agreed with a nod. "But being around other witches—" Poor Dad winced when she said that, so she stopped and held her hands up, as if that said it all.

Unfortunately, Dad wasn't hearing any of us. Even Tobias had something to add. "I don't want to go back somewhere I can't do my magic except in secret."

"You did just fine up until two months ago, you'll adjust. Your sister is a smart, talented, capable girl. I cannot stand by while this school, and all this magic folderol, make her feel like a failure."

The argument might have gone on for a lot longer, but I said, “Dad! I learned never to give up from you and Mom. Even if I failed the test, I’ll just take it again. I have to take it again. I have to do it. You know I do.”

“Honey—” He looked at me, and I knew he wanted to say something that would rescue me. But he stopped arguing. We both knew there wasn’t anything that could be said. I had to do this. “Fine. For now. But if you”—he looked at Tobias—“if either of you ever want out, all you have to do is—”

“Got it.” The Dorklock and I spoke in unison. We were committed to staying here. It was weird to be on the same page. Even weirder to want to stay in a place I never wanted to come to in the first place.



Chapter 23



I lingered in the kitchen for longer than usual that morning. It was one thing to tell my dad I wanted to stay at Agatha's. It was another thing to actually go back. What if Agatha decided to make the announcement that I'd failed boom into every classroom, like the morning and afternoon announcements did? Everyone would know I was a loser. Everyone. No doubt left. Homeschooling was looking like an option I could live with.

I had about six minutes to pull myself together before I'd be tardy and have to take a detention, as well as embrace my potential loserhood. Until the doorbell rang, and Samuel appeared in the kitchen. Mom and Dad disappeared without a good luck or good-bye.

“What are you doing here?” I didn’t mean to sound surly, but Samuel hadn’t been talking to me because he was jealous of Angelo. And now that I’d taken the test, pass or fail, here he was as if we’d never had our big fight.

“Your mom told me you’re freaking because you have to wait to find out if you passed the test.”

“Great.” Maybe I should have clued Mom in to the big Samuel-Pru rift. “I guess I can count you in on Agatha’s side—hoping I fail.”

He frowned. “Pru, I never—”

“Never want to talk to me again?” I didn’t want to fight, but I couldn’t seem to stop. I’d been working so hard to pass this test, to get the team in shape, to just hold on so my world didn’t go completely crazy. And now there was nothing to study for, just the *tick tick tick* of the clock until I knew whether I was still in remedial magic classes.

I’d never heard Samuel raise his voice. But he did then. And he even made it echo, like a movie special effect: “Never wanted to see you fail!” He continued in his regular voice: “You had a lot to learn, but you’ve learned so much, you know. You’re really smart. And driven.”

“So if you didn’t come to gloat, why did you come?” I asked.

“I guess you may still need tutoring, right? And a friend?”

“Why bother? I’m never going to be able to get out of remedial classes. I’m no good as a witch. I even dare to like mortals.”

Samuel blushed, embarrassed that I wasn't just going to let it drop. "Pru, I'm sorry. Your mom and dad do just fine. I'm sure if you wanted to date a mortal, you'd handle it no problem."

"Thanks." He was lying, according to the bracelet. Which made me happy. Sometimes friends have to lie, and for a fringie to know that this was a good time to tell a whopper—well, that meant he really *was* a friend.

"Now. Are you going to go to school with me, or are you going to stay home?"

"What if I fail?"

"You'll take the test again."

"What if I study forever and never manifest a Talent?"

"You will."

"Right. Maybe I should ask Tara. She'll tell me the truth, even if I am a little too much of a dirt shuffler for her liking."

"Stop it."

"Stop what? Trying to do things the mortal way?" I held up the hand that had the ring. "Do you know how often this vibrates a day?"

He held out his hand. "Give it to me."

"No. I—" I curled up my fist.

"I shouldn't have given it to you in the first place, Pru. There's nothing wrong with you doing things like a witch or a mortal, or combining the two. It's what makes you special. It's what makes you *you*."

I handed him the ring, and he tossed it up in the air, where it disappeared in a flash of light at the top of its arc.

“Feel better?” he asked gently.

“Not yet.” Okay, a little, but I had one more thing to clear up. “Tell me one thing—and don’t lie to me.” I held up my other hand, with his bracelet still on it. “Do you think I have what it takes to be a decent witch?”

He looked me right in the eye. And then he took off his glasses and looked me right in the eye again. Much better. “Pru, if you don’t have what it takes to turn the mortal-witch mix into dynamite, nobody does.”

My bracelet didn’t give even the slightest tingle. Although my toes did. Weird.

We popped into the school hallway together, and Samuel stood by my locker while I opened it and gave the ghost who guarded my lock his daily brownie.

No one said anything. I don’t know if it was because they didn’t have anything to say, or because Samuel had put a muting bubble around my locker. And I didn’t care. I had one friend for sure. And he thought I could—eventually—get the witch thing down. The Pru way.



Chapter 24



Witches! Stop playing!

Let's turn it out!

Everyone! Start praying!

Witches will smash the doubt!

The school day wasn't horrible. The other kids in the remedial classes didn't react to me at all. And lunch was spent in heavy duty me-time in the library. I know I wanted to take the school by storm and be Proud Pru. But I needed a little time to get all my resources together before I could pretend to be upbeat about the chance I'd aced—or even squeaked by—the test. Or so I told myself.

I'd thought—for about a micro-minisecond—about

claiming a migraine and ditching practice. But Coach Gertie would only wonder why I didn't know the potion for curing migraines. Knowing her, she'd show me. So I went to practice not knowing what I'd face there, friend or foe. But I went.

I'd faced my team back in Beverly Hills after some bad test grades (nothing less than an A minus, of course, but that had been *bad* back then). And I'd always known that I needed to shake off the disappointment and put on a happy face for practice, or game time, or whatever I was doing.

But how was I going to shake off the questions? How was I going to tell them I didn't have a clue if I'd passed or failed the test? So Agatha hadn't announced it publicly . . . yet. She could in five seconds, five days, or five months. Hecate, even if she whispered it privately into my ear, failure was failure. It would be like me failing the test to be a girl. There's nowhere to go from there except the limboland of losers.

I walked into practice expecting that everyone would be looking at me, reading the big L on my forehead. But, no. They were waiting with a big cake. A cake that said: CONGRATULATIONS!

Tara was grinning—so I guess she'd had fun with Angelo. “You said we should all celebrate everyone's victory like it was ours. So how's this.” She spread her arms wide, and fireworks buzzed through the air for a moment, popping out before they could fizzle back down to the floor and ruin the finish the basketball coach prized more than his best player.

"Great!"

Everyone crowded around. I was prime gossip, and they wanted every delicious drop. "Was it exhausting?"

"Oh, yeah."

I guess my lack of enthusiasm must have shown. Because then, tentatively . . . "You did pass, didn't you?"

"Mr. Phogg had to consult with Agatha. I haven't heard yet." I waited for the shunning to begin, even while I was trying to figure out how they hadn't known. Oh, yeah, the only one I'd told was Samuel. And he wouldn't have said a word.

Yvette said softly, "*Agatha* has to decide if you pass or fail?"

There was a small silence, a spontaneous moment of mourning. Not very encouraging. I'd hoped for more from cheerleaders.

Okay. So they thought Agatha would choose to fail me because she hated me. I considered coming clean. Confessing that I really didn't think there was much chance I'd pass. But then I reconsidered. We had a competition to win in a week.

So I put on my best cheer face. "Let's not worry about Agatha and tests right now. We have a competition to win. Everybody ready to get down to hard work?"

All the positive energy drained from the room immediately. "Do we really have to practice all the dirt shuffler moves?" Elektra moaned.

I've been mad before. But I've never been so mad that I

felt like I could take out a Wal-Mart with the tornado of fury raging inside me. *Dirt shuffler. Mortal.* They didn't have a clue. And I *didn't* have anything to be ashamed of. Those dirt shuffling mortal cheerleaders would clean this team's clock in competition. Guaranteed. Clean *my* clock too, because one person can't make a team.

I stared at them all, trying to hold it in. I'd never worked so hard to get nowhere as I had with this team. So, really, who could blame me when I snapped and tore a pom-pom apart with my bare hands? A quick peek in the rearview mirror probably would have told me to use magic, but I was way too fried to think of that. At first.

The squabbling girls slowly got silent as I furiously tore that pom-pom apart until there was not one strand joined to another.

I summoned a pom-pom that was still intact and shook it over my head. "This is a team who knows their dirt shuffling moves." I pointed to the floor, at the scattered bits of orange and black and red. "That's us."

They just looked puzzled. With a touch of fear. Good.

Now that I had their attention, I had to do more than have a temper tantrum if I had a hope that we wouldn't be laughed off the floor at the Regionals.

I zapped one strand of pom-pom to each girl's hands. "Here! Let's cheer."

They were like sheep. Staring at me. Staring at the pom-

pom strand in each hand. Some of them tried to drop it, but I chanted a quick spell to keep the strands in hand.

“Victory stance.” I took the stance, sharp, perfect lines. I held up my two strands. They goggled at me. “Victory stance.” I sent a mini-tornado whirling the leftover strands into the air.

They took the victory stance.

I put on my best lead cheerleader stance. “Shake it, girls. V-I-C-T-O-R-Y.”

“This is stupid.” Tara had found a way to counter my simple spell. She tossed her strands of pom-pom away. “One strand doesn’t do any good.” She waved her hand, and the pom-pom I’d shredded came back together. She held it up.

“Right. Thanks, Tara, for pointing out to everyone what they’re missing.”

She looked at me with a frown that indicated she didn’t have a clue what I was getting at.

“The squad works best with all of us *together*.” I shook my pom-pom. “Together. Get it?”

Unbelievably, they did. At last. I had a feeling it was too little, too late. Surprisingly, it still felt wonderful to have my team on the same page for the first time since I’d been at Agatha’s.

Wait. Second time. We’d all agreed on the calendar, too.

Maybe it was crazy of me, but suddenly I was hoping for a third time’s the charm moment at competition.



Chapter 25



I'd thought the Tara-Angelo hookup had gone unnoticed. I'd thought wrong. Mrs. Kenton had noticed, and she had taken her displeasure to Mom. Mom, in her turn, had decided that the problem of Angelo needed to be fixed. She had decided to head off Angelo's next visit to our house by taking care of the lawn herself in the dead of night.

I could have told her it wouldn't work. You'd think she'd have known that, after living next to Ms. Darbley in Beverly Hills.

Mrs. Kenton came over about two hours and fifteen minutes quicker than Ms. Darbley would have. She rang the doorbell twice and smiled a broad—and totally fake—smile. “I see you’ve hired a yard service.”

Mom blinked. "Yes, I didn't want to take advantage of Angelo any longer. He's been so attentive to our yard that I'm afraid his studies will suffer."

It was Mrs. Kenton's turn to blink. "I understand. How very thoughtful of you. Whom did you hire?"

Mom clearly had not expected this level of nosiness. "Midnight Gardeners," she mumbled.

"Midnight Gardeners?" Mrs. Kenton repeated. She looked . . . occupied . . . for a moment, like she was flipping through the big Rolodex in her mind. Evidently, she didn't find a listing, because she asked, "They're called midnight because they work at night?"

"Yes." Mom was keeping her answer to one word. She used to babble to explain things to Ms. Darbley in Beverly Hills, but she'd learned long ago that short and sweet was safer.

Mrs. Kenton smiled, as if she had an answer she could compute. "That must explain why I didn't see the truck or the workers."

Mom looked sick. She really hated lying, and yet she had no choice here. "Yes."

"I like that concept." Mrs. Kenton was completely unaware of my mother's discomfort. I wasn't sure whether that was because she was just insensitive, or whether Mom hid things well, except from me. "Very forward-thinking. That way, there's no visible sign you're having work done. It truly happens like magic."

Mom didn't say anything. I don't think she breathed. I know I didn't. Usually, back in Beverly Hills, with Ms. Darbley, this was the moment that Mom had to decide whether to do the whole mind-wipe thing or just let Ms. Darbley think she was seeing things.

Mrs. Kenton didn't seem to notice the tension. "Do you have their card?"

"Card?" Mom said blankly.

"Business card?"

"No, I'm sorry, I misplaced it."

"I saw where you put it, Mom." I ran over to the entry table, where Dad slings his keys when he comes home. As I ran, I popped a little card onto the table that said, very elegantly, MIDNIGHT GARDENERS. I added a tiny black cat in the top-right corner and a fake phone number in the bottom left. Then, ignoring my mother's glare, I picked it up and gave it to Mrs. Kenton. "Here you go."

"Thank you, Prudence." She took it like it was gold and seemed quite impressed. "Very nice card stock."

When Mrs. Kenton left, Mom looked at me. I could sense the lecture coming on.

I held up my hand. "Wait. She isn't going to call, Mom. She can't. Angelo is her son. She has to use him."

Mom raised an eyebrow. "What if she calls for rates, just to see what we're paying?"

Okay. I should have thought of that. "True. But I can fix

that." I walked over to the window and watched as Mrs. Kenton strode down the walkway and through our one-of-a-kind gargoyle gate. Just as she reached a particularly troublesome bush, I summoned the card from her pocket. I tried to be delicate and give just a little nudge until the breeze caught it and blew it into the bushes. Mrs. Kenton continued on, oblivious.

I turned to Mom. "There. She knows we gave her the card and she took it. When she can't find it, she'll give up. Bonus: There's no mind-wipe needed."

Mom shook her head. "I think you may just be beginning to think like a real witch, Pru—with a very clever mortal twist, too."

It was probably the highest compliment she'd ever paid me. For a second I wanted to cry, it felt so good to have her say it aloud. I just wished I believed it.

I noticed Angelo coming home from raking the neighbor's yard. Mom caught me looking.

"You can go talk to him if you want."

"Really?" I could hardly believe my ears.

"I'll even lift the alone with a boy charm."

"Why?" I was suspicious.

"Because you have to say good-bye to him for a while, Prudence." She didn't even give me a chance to protest. "A mortal boy is only going to be a distraction when you take up your regular magic classwork."

“But, Mom . . .” Then what she said registered. “My regular—”

“I got the letter from Agatha while you were at practice.”

“Let me see it.” I could barely breathe. I had to read it for myself to be sure. Yep. It did indeed say I’d passed the test and was now assigned to regular magic classes. Of course, there were phrases like “skin of her teeth” and “barely squeaking by” and “will be watching for signs of trouble.” But none of that mattered. I had passed!

I spent about thirty seconds screaming silently in joy. And then I ran outside to intercept Angelo before he got home and found out from his mother that we’d cancelled his gardening service.

He smiled when he saw me coming down the walk, and I wondered if I would ever get used to the feeling his smile sent through me. “That was a great sweet sixteen party. Thanks for inviting me. I forgot to tell you so on Halloween because you disappeared and left me with Tara.”

“Don’t be silly. You don’t have to thank me. We’re neighbors.”

He winced. “I know my mom can be pushy, but she means well.”

“Of course she does. She’s a mom.”

“Uber-mom is more like it, I’m afraid. You might want to warn your mother that my mother has decided that I should

go to your school. She thinks it must be really exclusive because no one knows much about it."

"It's just a school." I didn't panic at what he said, because Mrs. Kenton wouldn't have any luck finding a form to apply. And it would drive Mom batty when the nosy neighbor kept hinting. Maybe I'd conjure up an incredible disappearing application form—one that disintegrated slowly on the way from our house to theirs? Or maybe not. I didn't need to be grounded for pulling magical pranks on the mortal neighbors.

Angelo leaned on our fence, obviously prepared to chat. That felt good. "I never see you around. They sure keep you busy at that school of yours."

"Just the usual—although cheerleading practice and games keep me busy. But I like busy." Not that I would mind hanging out with Angelo. Maybe when I got the hang of regular magic classes . . .

"Cheerleader, huh? I should have guessed."

"Why?" I didn't like the smile he had when he said "cheerleader." "You're not one of those prejudiced types who thinks cheerleaders are just airheads with Barbie doll figures, are you?"

"Absolutely not." He crossed his heart with his index finger.

"Good thing." I raised the pitch of my voice to match his mother's "This *is* an exclusive neighborhood, you know."

He laughed, and I was glad he hadn't taken offense. His

mother was a true piece of work, but she was also his mother. I knew my mother could drive me absolutely batty, but I didn't like it when someone else pointed it out.

Tobias came trotting out, his Game Boy in hand. "Mom needs you, Pru."

Sure she did.

"Well, I'll see you around, busy girl." Angelo took the hint and headed toward his house. I watched him walk, enjoying the view.

Darn. I had intended to ask if he'd like to go driving with me, Samuel, and Tara. But I just couldn't find a way to work it in to the conversation. I guess I'd have to be sure to catch him again. Soon.



Chapter 26



Look out! Swooooosh!

Here come the Wiiiiitches!

Outta tha way! Swooooosh!

The Witches are here to staaaay!

The team had worked hard, finally, but it was crunch time. We walked into the gymnasium where it was all going to happen and I started to feel the rush, just like always.

Celestina winced and put her hands over her ears.

“Awesome!” Tara and the others moved forward, drinking everything in. So did I. I loved the sound of Regionals. Okay, *sound* is way too vanilla a word for the awesomely chaotic, cacophonous array of screams, giggles, duhs, and

omigods that echoed through the enormous gym. There was nothing else like it. Except maybe Nationals. But that was putting the trophy before the competition. If the Witches didn't do well, we wouldn't be going to Nationals. Not unless we could squeeze in another regional tournament—and do well at it. You needed to place in the top twenty at a Regional to get an invitation to Nationals.

Last year's regional champions were practicing on the floor. They were not quite flawless—it took competition adrenaline to get to that level, for most teams. But they were close. They were doing triple backflips with strong landings, and they had flyers that actually looked like they were flying. Not to mention impeccable timing. And their uniforms were way cute, too. Probably designer.

Celestina didn't even bother trying to talk above the noise of the room, she just sent a whisper directly to my ear. “Do we have a chance here? They're magnificent.”

“A good team always has a chance,” I whispered back.

Don't get me wrong. I didn't think the Witches had much of a chance. Even though there'd been a major attitude adjustment since my pom-pom meltdown, we'd only had a week of winning attitude to work with. Snapping a tight move was still optional for half the squad. But I'd seen miracles happen at tournaments before, so I wasn't ruling anything out until the last team pranced off the field. I'm an optimist that way. Especially

since the letter came freeing me from remedial magic classes.

As I looked around the room, soaking it all in, I was shocked to see Samuel, Maria, and Denise sitting in the front row of the bleachers, waving GO, WITCHES signs.

When your friends come through for you in a way you never expected, it makes all the fear and doubt go away for a split second.

I walked over to say hi, wondering if Maria and Denise would talk to me. I had my answer when Maria jumped up and hugged me. "Congratulations, Pru! I'm so glad you got out of remedial magic. I know how much you hated it."

"It's made me a little crazy, I guess." I tried to think of a way to apologize without making anyone mad all over again.

Denise shrugged. "You were trying to build the team. Samuel explained it." She looked at the nearly flawless team as they finished their routine and scattered off the floor. "How do you think you'll do?"

"The best we can."

Maria giggled. "Oh dear, that doesn't sound good."

"I don't know why you do this at all." Samuel looked pained. "The noise in this place is amazing."

I grinned at him. "Wait until the cheering for the cheerleaders begins."

"I thought cheerleaders were supposed to cheer for other

people, not be cheered themselves. Doesn't that go against the peppiness principle?" Denise. Sigh. That's what you get when you have fringe friends.

I wouldn't have it any other way.

"Wish us luck!"

"Luck." They said it in unison, like they meant it. Kewl.

I went back to my team. The Salem Witches. We looked great in our uniforms. It helps that witches don't have bad-hair days unless they're in a bad magical vortex. But the excitement in the gym was contagious.

"Feel at home with all this dirt shuffling?" Elektra asked me. She could be the snarkiest when she was scared. She reminded me of some of the girls back at Beverly Hills who got really nasty right before competition.

"I am home." I smiled. They could see I meant it. But I don't think it helped. Not that I blamed them. I remembered my first competition. All the girls were nervous. Finally, surrounded by girls who had mastered the art of working as a team, the Witches had an inkling of how much it mattered. I was afraid it would be too little, too late. Although a very small part of me was hoping that I was wrong. That we could pull it out and wow the crowd. I'd kept the choreography simple, and the Witches didn't have a huge fear of falling because we were allowed to use protective magic as long as it was undetectable to humans and didn't affect the routine.

The temptation to cast spells right and left to make us look less foolish was strong, but I didn't do it. Not just because I couldn't, but because I took the rules that Coach had given us very seriously. If you can't win without cheating, it doesn't mean a thing.

Having to watch all the other teams was excruciating. I could feel all the confidence we'd felt as a team slowly leach away as we watched the backflips and perfect form. I noticed we sat forward in sync every time a foot slipped, or a cheerleader stumbled. There were a few falls, and my heart broke for those girls. I knew how it felt to stumble in front of the crowd.

When it was our turn, we ran onto the floor and waved, looking as confident as all the other girls had looked. It was part of the job. But I hoped against hope that we wouldn't make any mistakes so memorable that we'd be the gossip for the next ten years. I'd seen it happen to one team a few years ago. They'd thrown a flyer up and then pulled apart. They were supposed to come together again and catch her. Only they didn't, and she landed in a heap on the floor. Ouch.

Our first moves went well—simple, uncomplicated, but coordinated. The crowd hushed as we began to clap, and even let out an *oooh* of appreciation for our coordinated backflip pair: Elektra and Charity, the only two who could be sure to be in sync. We didn't have a winning routine, we

couldn't do the dynamite moves—the whole team with multiple coordinated backflips, synchronization that seemed supernatural—but we were looking good. Until we got to the one move I wasn't sure was wise to put in the routine.

They'd all wanted the pyramid so badly that I had relented. Now, as we tried to get it together to make a sharp one, I regretted my decision. Just like every other cheering move, a great pyramid looks easy, but a bad pyramid looks . . . bad. I knew Coach would make sure no one fell on the floor. But there was no way she could ease the ego damage that would be inflicted if things didn't go well.

The crowd hushed, and then murmured. Not in a good way. We hadn't pulled it off, and it had cost us.

There's something about competition. A mindset, a fever, I don't know what you call it. Maybe the zone. When you're in it, you can do no wrong. When you get knocked out of it—you're toast. And we were. We fell out of the pyramid and couldn't get the rhythm back. Our clapping was off, our moves just a touch soft and slow instead of sharp and fierce. The crowd was kind. They clapped.

My team knew. This may have been their first regional competition, but they knew just-miss failure when they saw it reflected in the faces in the crowd. In the sympathetic smiles of the judges. I could see the knowledge sink in. It stiffened our team smiles and made our chants wooden.

As our team struggled to come even halfway to the level

of the other cheerleading teams, I knew that there was no way to make up for the hard work and sweat we hadn't put in before the competition. That assessment was probably a very mortal way of looking at things, but so be it. Samuel was right, I needed to be true to Pru—both my mortal half and my witch half. When it came to cheering, I didn't see how avoiding hard work and putting down the synchronization of mortal teams could spell anything but L! O! S! E! R! Rah! Rah!

I just wish I didn't feel like it was all my fault. I had known all along what we needed to do and I couldn't find a way to make it happen. And as much as I'd like to blame it on Tara's touchiness about her team—or even the cheerleaders themselves—I felt responsible. At the time, I had tried everything I could think of, but now I wished I had pushed just a little bit harder. Twenty-twenty hindsight, I guess.

The girls didn't want to stay for the final judging, but I insisted and Coach Gertie backed me up.

“Why should we stay? We sucked, and everyone knows it,” Elektra complained.

That was easy for me. “It's called good sportsmanship. And it's important. Especially if we want to try for the next Regional so we can get an invitation to Nationals.”

“Are you joking?” Tara looked shocked. “I'd never want to look so foolish ever again.”

“Me neither,” I said, shrugging. “But why is that our only

choice? We can improve. I know we can." If I could learn sixteen years' worth of magic in under six months, why couldn't the team be ready to sweep a Regional in that time?

"What makes you think so?" Yvette asked.

"Everyone has the skills. If you listen to me, we'll get there. If you back each other up, we'll be there."

"By March, when Nationals are?" She sounded hopeful. Which made me hopeful. A little.

But I knew that letting doubts stop you was a waste of time. You had to believe you could do it, or you probably wouldn't. "If you don't believe, you'll never succeed."

"That's a platitude." Tara looked unhappy. But I knew how to turn her around. Dangling another date with Angelo in front of her was the perfect bribe to get me all kinds of cooperation.

Elektra wasn't willing to let go of the doubt. "A crock, you mean. You can believe all you want, but if you can't do something, you can't do it."

"Think of it this way: You can't just believe your way into something. You have to work. But you can believe your way into success one step at a time."

Coach Gertie nodded. "Prudence is right, girls."

A little more hope mixed in with the doubt on their faces.

I knew what we needed: an acknowledgment that we had done our best. "Losing sucks, doesn't it?"

Everybody nodded like bobblehead dolls.

“But, Sunita—you didn’t drop Elektra, did you?”

Sunita shook her head with a puzzled little frown.

“That was the first time you didn’t drop her, wasn’t it?”

She nodded, a look of surprised delight crossing her face.

“So we all did a little better. We succeeded where we had been failing.”

“Tell that to the judges.” I couldn’t tell who had muttered that, but it didn’t matter. We all felt it.

I shrugged, as if I didn’t care what the judges thought. “They’re not the ones who matter.”

That got me a shocked silence, and then, timidly, Yvette asked, “No? Then why are we here?”

Easy. “We’re here to show everyone we rock when we work together. It was too soon to try to place in a competition.”

“*Never* would be too soon,” Tara mumbled.

“Unh-unh. Setting out to win, well, we had all new rules to learn. We concentrate on learning them first. Then we aim for winning.”

As I spoke, I knew how true my words were. I’d done the same thing with learning magic. I’d defined success as being out of remedial classes. I should have defined it as learning as fast as I could. I’d tried to do everything on my to-do list all at once. That never works. I’d learned in kindergarten that you need to make a list, and then cross things off until you’re at your goal.

“So you think we could get better?” Sunita asked.

I smiled. “Can you eat an entire watermelon in one bite?”

Everyone shook their head.

No duh. “But if you break it down, can you get it all eaten?”

They nodded.

“And isn’t it true that the more of you to eat it, the quicker it will get eaten?”

More nods.

“So. Let’s cut getting to Nationals into bits and eat it by March!”

It was a bit of a sappy movie moment then. Every hand shot up in unison, and there were victory signs aimed at the sky. We were *the Witches*! Nothing was going to stop us now.

The day after a tournament, whether you win or lose, always feels a little *less* than tournament day. The adrenaline stops pumping, the bruises start showing, and voices have a throaty rasp. All your mistakes seem larger than life, and there’s nothing you can do about them once they’re made, of course. Until next time.

I was feeling that way. Seeing things I could have, should have done better. Wondering if I *could* do them better. Yes, I’d passed the test and won my way out of remedial classes—barely. But that meant that now I’d have to do well in regular magic classes. I couldn’t rely on Cousin Seamus and

his time-stretching, either. I'd have to work harder than I already had, just to get to this point.

I'd convinced the team that we could get to Nationals. I'd told them we could win it. They'd believed me. Which was great. Except that they were counting on me to lead them there. And I wasn't even sure I could pass the regular magic courses now that I was in them.

But, as sore and tired as I was from the struggle to get to where I am today, I was ready to start trying again. I'm already imagining a life where I have a shot at making passing grades in regular magic *and* getting this new, improved team focused on winning a national championship. Maybe.

Wait. Time for a Prutastic attitude adjustment. Make that *definitely*.

Don't miss out on the magic
in Pru's next adventure:
She's a Witch Girl

"I thought you put a zit spell on her not that long ago. So what's wrong with having a little fun now?" Tara's eyes were sparkly with the idea of giving my old team a little banana-peel action to mess with their competition mind-set.

I, not being clueless, knew seeing that look should signal me to run. Or, technically, since we *are* witches, to fly. But that was problematic.

Problem one? We were in the bleachers, surrounded by mortals. Problem two? I half hoped Tara might convince me that it was okay to do more than psych out the team that I'd hoped to lead before my move, who were about to perform a kick-pom-pom competition routine if I didn't do something major to stop them.

It was problem three that made me say, "If we're going to beat them, we're going to do it fair and with flair." Problem three? I'm a good cheerleader, and a good cheerleader never lets jealousy, PMS, or a bad breakup cause a premature competition quake under another team's feet.

Tara looked around at the crowd of parents and friends, all focused on the championship Beverly Hills team getting

ready to sweep Regionals and take it on to Nationals again. “You’re such a wimp, Pru the Mortal Lover.”

I couldn’t really argue with Tara. She was right. She was willing to go meaner than I ever would. When she’d heard about Maddie, she’d been totally on my side about the zit spell—she didn’t think I’d gone far *enough*.

“Come on,” she urged, refusing to give up. “We aren’t going to hurt them—just shake their pom-poms up a little. What’s the harm in that? It’s not like we’re going to do anything to permanently kill their cheer mojo. Right?”

“True, but . . .” It finally occurred to me that Tara had heard enough of the scoop about Maddie and me to know I’d be easy to turn over to the dark side. Too easy. Not that I didn’t have qualms. Nope. I had plenty, sitting right in my stomach, twisting my guts into cute little ringlets. And now that I was out of remedial classes—and Coach’s Gertie’s great hope to lead us to a championship—what more tattle-worthy tale would she have than me playing unfair with mortals? Competing mortals, at that. Definitely expel-worthy dirt of the most exclusive nature.

But she had a point I couldn’t deny: The Beverly Hills team was nothing if not great—thanks to me, not that they remembered at all. They were lined up, smiling, completely on for the crowd and ready for the music to start.

Cheer competition is fifty-fifty: 50 percent skill and 50 percent attitude. I knew they had the skill, and everyone

could see they had the attitude. They were going to nail this routine, unless the ceiling fell in, or witch happened. So what would be the harm in creating a little spell to make them forget my routines like they'd forgotten me? I shook my head, refusing the temptation with every last ounce of cheer training I had. "We'll know we deserve it when we beat them at Nationals."

The music started, so loud it beat into our bones. Tara and I watched, just like everyone else in the bleachers, as the team moved with a synchronicity and energy that made me want to be down there with them. "They *are* good," Tara said.

"They should be, they're using my routines." And they were, too. All the routines I'd created and saved up in my notebook for the time when I would be head cheerleader at Beverly Hills. My old team was performing them almost as I'd envisioned when I was writing the choreography.

"Are they? Well, I hope you can come up with more, then, because these are amazing." Tara glanced around at the mesmerized mortals around us. "Do you think you can beat your old choreography?"

Could I? "With one pom-pom tied behind my back." I wasn't going to let Tara doubt it, even if *I* did as I watched my routines come to competitive life. I couldn't even be mad that they'd stolen my notebook, because I'd willingly given it over when my parents had yanked me clear across country. At the time, I'd wanted them to keep winning. But

now, four months later? If I wouldn't get into trouble with my mom, I'd take the notebook back from my old teammates and wipe their memories clean.

Chezzie had made a few changes, of course. When you were head cheerleader, you had to put your stamp on the year, or you couldn't hold your head up high. She'd gotten rid of a solo double backflip I'd choreographed just for Maddie. She'd replaced it with a pair, for Chezzie and a new girl I didn't know. They were good.

I hoped that burned Maddie raw deep inside her heart. But as I watched her, having lost fifteen pounds and gained the confidence to stand without wavering on the raised hands of her teammates, I knew it didn't—Maddie was a team player, and she was busy nailing her part of the routine. I remembered what that felt like, and I clapped like mad when the music and the girls stopped at exactly the same moment, routine over. Routine *nailed*. The crowd gave them a standing ovation.

For a teeny portion of a second, I felt like a part of the team again. I felt like if I materialized and they saw me, they'd pull me into the victory embrace. Credit me with helping to make the winning routine. Call me a cheer sister again.

But as I saw Maddie run off to do the victory embrace with my old crush Brent, I knew I could never go back.

The words would be right. The credit would be partially mine, but I was no longer a member of the team. They

had moved on, past me. *Way* past me. If I were to show up, it would be like a ghost from the past. Sure, you honor and bow to her, but you don't expect her to begin eating, breathing, or living on the mortal plane again. Her time has passed. *My* time as a part of the Beverly Hills team had passed.

I stood there breathing shallowly, watching them celebrate the spectacular and no-doubt winning performance as I fought the pain of knowing I was history here.

After a minute, the pain dulled enough for me to speak to Tara as if I weren't devastated by all this. "I think they're going to win this competition. So they'll definitely be one of the top-rated teams in the finals."

"So if we decide we want to do this national competition thing, we'll have to beat them? Won't that be weird for you?" Tara got that glittery look again. "Facing your old team?"

"Yes." I struggled with the thought. I'd tossed it out there once, in a conversation with Maddie, back when I was still talking—or rather, texting—with her. But I'd never really believed it until now.

Now. Well, suffice to say that all I wanted was to whip the Witches into shape, sweep the next Regionals to erase our old defeat from cheer memory, and take my old team down. It would be interesting, too—my old mortal routines against my new, witch-world-inspired routines. Me against me.

I thudded back to earth. The only problem was that the Beverly Hills girls understood the power of synchronicity and didn't think muscle power was beneath them.

The Witches, well, they didn't have any of that going for them, despite my best efforts. That was why it was so important for me to get Tara to want the win. "Can't you imagine us? Out there? The crowd cheering for us?"

"Maybe." She shrugged, clearly not convinced it was worth the effort. "But if we didn't? How hard would it be for you to lose to the girl who stole your boyfriend?"

Hard. "I'd survive."

Barely. Not that Maddie had really *stolen* my boyfriend. Technically. If I'd still been in Beverly Hills, I'm sure she wouldn't have dated Brent and become his girlfriend. And—despite near-daily text messages between us for that first few weeks after my move—forgotten to mention that little fact to me.

"It would be sweet though, wouldn't it? To take her down a little, like she did you? So would you be willing to use your"—she glanced around at the crowd which was breaking up to go get lunch—"special skills to make sure we win?"

I pictured it. There was Maddie, poised for a toss to the rafters. Oops—there was Maddie, awkwardly falling and being caught just before she landed on the floor—but not before she ruined the perfection of the routine. With one little tweak of magic, I could make sure my old team

didn't win. I could take it away from them, just like how the routines I'd written gave them the chance to win it.

I smiled, happy for one second, before I heard Chezzie's voice calling my name. I turned my head, going into cheering mode without thought, a big smile plastered on my face, even though what I really wanted to do was run . . . fly . . . away. I watched as she climbed up into the bleachers. "Did you see us? I think we nailed it. What do you think?"

"I think you did, too." I raised my arms in a V and pretended I had pom-poms to shake. "Go team! Win it!"

Some of the other girls had trailed her and were climbing up into the bleachers. A nightmare in living cheer colors. No escape for the Witches. Great.

"Did your parents let you come for a visit?"

"Are you moving back?"

I didn't see who asked the questions, and I didn't care. I blurted out, "I wanted to see how my routines worked in competition. Mom and Dad were kewl with it. Thank goodness for the red-eye, huh? You guys were great."

Chezzie narrowed her eyes when I said "my old routines." Her smile sharpened up a bit. "Yeah, we worked hard to glitter up those ideas of yours. It was great that you had some notes to get us started with, they really gave us a head start."

Her words swam around in my head furiously. *Glitter up. Some notes. Head start. Beeyotch.*

Tara had my back, surprisingly enough. “Pru’s a genius with the routines, isn’t she? Wait until you see what she’s done for our team.”

“Are you going to send us a DVD? ’Cause I don’t think any of us are planning to go slumming in Salem any time soon. Are we girls?” There was a faint, unenthusiastic chorus of nos. Chezzie’s competition high was wearing off faster than expected, which left her even more of a tired beeyotch than usual. So sad—for her, not me.

Tara practically purred her answer. “I meant at Nationals, of course. When we beat you.”

Chezzie smiled and shook her finger at me. “It’s not nice to copy other teams’ routines. I’d expect you to know that, Pru; you’ve been on a championship team before.” She looked down her plastic-surgery-perfect nose at Tara. “Unlike some people.”

Big mistake. For a second, I thought Tara might turn her into a ferret, no matter what the consequences. But instead, she just returned Chezzie’s fake helpful tone.

“Don’t be silly. I’m not the kind of head cheerleader who’d use those routines—they’re soooo last summer. Pru’s been working on cutting-edge stuff for the Witches.”

I might have been a bit more worried about the definition of *cutting edge*, if I hadn’t seen Maddie turn to look for Chezzie and catch sight of us standing there in the bleachers. She didn’t start over right away; she looked at

Brent first. She didn't say anything to him, she just grabbed his hand and dragged him behind her as she walked slowly toward me. Could things possibly get worse?

Chezzie looked at Tara. "You're head cheerleader?" She turned to me, and I could see her trying to decide how to dull my cutting edge. Just then, Maddie and Brent appeared and Chezzie smiled, pulling Maddie up beside her. "Guess what, Maddie? Pru's been creating cutting-edge routines for her new team. They think they're going to beat us."

"We *are* going to beat you. Without even breaking a sweat." Tara wasn't afraid of making idle threats. She had the magic to back it up—not that that would be a good thing. But I don't think she cared at the moment. I know I didn't.

Chezzie said, oh-so-casually, "But how can you have time for new routines when you're having to try so hard to pass your classes?" She smiled at Maddie. "Isn't that what you told everyone? That Pru wasn't doing well at her new school?"

I started a slow burn inside. Maddie had outed me? Sure, it was one thing to poach Brent when I wasn't around. But to tell my secrets? The backstabber didn't even have the grace to look ashamed when she asked, "That's right, Pru, didn't you say you were in remedial classes?"

I raised an eyebrow, thinking of how to deny Maddie's

charges without outright lying. "I'm not in remedial classes. You must have misread my texts." I flicked a glance at Brent. "Maybe you were trying to do two things at once and the text message got lost in translation."

Tara had no compunction about lying. "Pru's not only a great student, she's a great cheerleader. I'm lucky to have her on my team. We're going to win Nationals this year, so start getting used to the idea of second place. K?"

Chezzie was done with me. She and Tara were face-to-face—and neither face was happy underneath the fake, cheerleader smiles. "Have you ever competed before?"

Tara conveniently forgot our recent stinging loss. "In two weeks and five hours, we'll be winning the Frozen Four Regionals."

"Is that so?" Chezzie grinned, for real this time. "Then, no offense, I think *you're* the one who ought to be getting used to the sound of second place—if you're lucky."

Tara raised her chin. "We're not only lucky—we're good." Good liars, anyway.

I tried not to glance at Maddie, but failed. She looked back at me like I was a stranger. Then she hooked her arm around Brent's waist. The look in her eye dared me to do something about it. Lucky for her I didn't.

The voice over the loudspeaker announced that the judges were going to present awards, and called the teams to the floor.

Chezzie gave Tara one last glare. “Whatever. Watch real winners, and get a clue.”

The girls moved quickly back to the floor, lining up like the champions they were.

“It’s not too late for a tiny little earthquake, just under their feet.”

I stood and clapped when my old team won first place—as if it had ever been in doubt. “That’s not the way to win, Tara. That’s not what competition is about, not even for witches.”

I admit I regretted the thought a moment later, when Brent ran out onto the floor and gave Maddie another big smooch.

“So you’re just going to let her get away with stealing your routines and your boyfriend?”

“She didn’t steal my routines, I gave them to her.” But I hadn’t given her Brent. She’d definitely taken him without my blessing.

“Seems a shame you’re just going to let her walk all over you.” Tara was clearly unhappy with me. No doubt she would have created a spectacular failure for the team, if she’d been the one feeling the way I was at the moment. Not that that was much consolation. I thought Tara was a difficult person to get along with, but in this one case, I *so* got why some people called revenge “sweet.”

I watched Maddie and Brent walk away arm in arm. I’d

done this once before. I'd been invisible then, too, but not by choice. I'd wanted Maddie to see me, but I'd been too hurt, too scared, to face what that confrontation would do to me, so I'd become invisible without wanting to. Fear can do funny things to a person, I can attest to that firsthand.

Anger can, too, apparently. Because, without even thinking hard about it, I raised my arms in the air behind the departing couple and chanted:

"Love is fine
Love is grand
You crossed the line
Let your ire be fanned."

"A breakup spell?" Tara chuckled evilly. "I didn't think you had it in you. Good girl." Tara was back to being happy now that I'd used my magic for revenge.

"It won't break them up if they don't mind fighting a lot." I smiled. I'd cast the spell knowing it wasn't a full on breakup spell. I couldn't do that. A little trouble? Why not. Everyone knows that teen love is puppy love and that your first love never lasts. You could almost say I was doing them both a favor.

"Yeah, well, maybe when we win it you can deliver the final blow to that relationship without using a single whiff of magic."

“Winning without magic is going to be tough, you know?”

Tara shrugged, her eyes following Chezzie, who was holding the trophy, hoisted up by her team to ride their shoulders in triumph. “Like you say, it will be worth it.”

About the Author

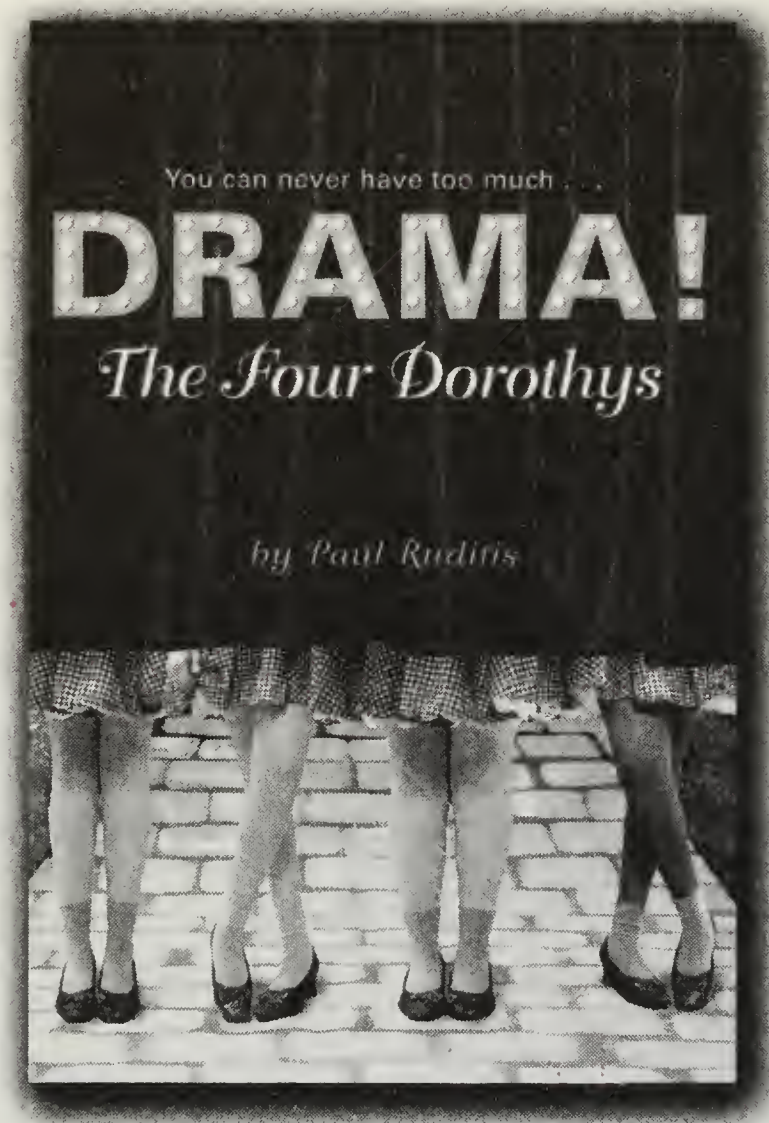
Kelly McClymer was born in South Carolina, but crossed the Mason-Dixon Line to live in Delaware at age six. After one short stint living in South Carolina during junior high, she has remained above the Line, and now lives in Maine with her husband and three children.

Writing has been Kelly's passion since her sixth-grade essay on how not to bake bread earned her an A+. After cleaning up the bread dough that oozed onto the floor, she gave up bread making for good and turned to writing as a creative outlet. A graduate of the University of Delaware (English major, of course), she spends her days writing and teaching writing. Her most recent novels include *The Salem Witch Tryouts*, and *Getting to Third Date*, which is part of the Simon Pulse Romantic Comedy line.

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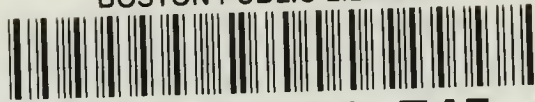
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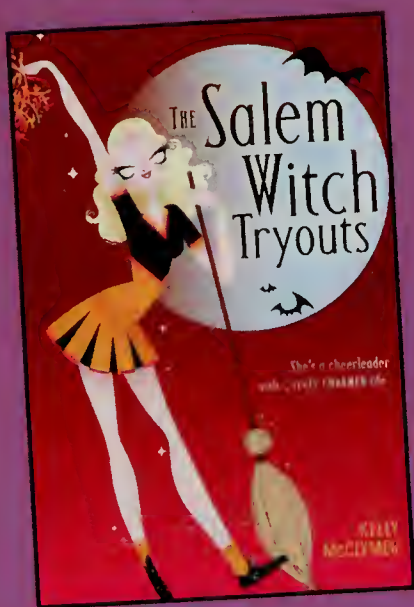
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